

1 LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

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3 TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2019

4 United States Senate,
5 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
6 House of Representatives,
7 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
8 Washington, D.C.

9 The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 2:06 p.m.,
10 in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny
11 Isakson and Hon. Mark Takano, Chairmen of the Committees,
12 presiding.

13 Senators Present: Senators Isakson, Boozman, Cassidy,
14 Rounds, Rounds, Tillis, Blackburn, Tester, Brown,
15 Blumenthal, Hirono, and Sinema.

16 Members Present: Representatives Takano, Brownley,
17 Lamb, Levin, Rose, Brindisi, Cisneros, Lee, Cunningham,
18 Luria, Pappas, Allred, Roe, Coleman Radewagen, Bost,
19 Bergman, Banks, and Meuser.

20 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

21 Chairman Isakson. I am Johnny Isakson, Chairman of the
22 Veterans' Affairs Committee in the United States Senate. I
23 want to welcome the House members that are here and note all
24 of my members are not here yet, but they better be coming,
25 so--

1 [Laughter.]

2 Chairman Isakson. They promised me, and I said, "There
3 is nobody more important than DAV, and I want to make sure
4 that you are here when they are here." So they will be
5 coming.

6 All of us will have to be in and out a lot. The House
7 is voting right now. They have votes at 2:30, and Mr.
8 Crenshaw is going to do an introduction for us in just a
9 minute or two. We will be here to do that, and that will
10 kick off our meeting. But until, then I am going to buy a
11 little time and do a couple of hefty things so we can get
12 started and not waste any time.

13 Welcome to this hearing. We do hearing every 1 or 2
14 years with all of the VSOs, the veterans service
15 organizations, to find out what is on their mind, get their
16 compliments, and get their criticism, and, obviously, with
17 deployed as long as we have been now in the Middle East and
18 Iraq and Afghanistan, with the challenges we faced in so
19 many different things, there are lots of things on your
20 mind. And veterans' affairs are a big deal.

21 When the veterans sign up to volunteer to fight for our
22 Country, if called, you know what that means. That means
23 you go if they call, and lots have gone, just like you did
24 in your time in the year behind us.

25 And we owe it to them to make sure the medical services

1 they receive, the benefits they receive, the things they
2 were promised are in fact delivered on.

3 And all of us on this Committee do not find ourselves
4 to be Republicans or Democrats. We are Americans who
5 support the American military and the people who allow us to
6 do the job we do today because of the sacrifice and the
7 service that they made.

8 So this is a bipartisan, nonpartisan committee. The
9 only thing we are partisan to are veterans and their
10 families, and that is the way it is going to be as long as I
11 am Chairman.

12 Jon Tester, who is my Ranking Member, Democrat, is a
13 phenomenal member. We are a team. We do everything in
14 pairs. I think everybody noticed the last 2 years when we
15 lost our first Secretary and had a new appointee made, the
16 two of us decided there were certain issues that ought to be
17 discussed, and we got them discussed. We got them to public
18 air, and it became not the thing to do to hire that person
19 or move that person up, and we did not. But we did it
20 together, and we did it the right way by getting all the
21 information, not by playing politics.

22 And we have Mr. Wilkie now, who is an outstanding
23 nominee for Secretary. I am afraid any day now, he is going
24 to get stolen because he is so good and smart and has so
25 much background.

1 But our commitment on this Committee is to see to it
2 that the veterans get what they signed up for. They did not
3 want to get shot, but they signed up knowing if they risked
4 their life and did get shot that we would take care of them.

5 I have been to Landstuhl in German. I have been to
6 hospitals in the United States of America, seeing our
7 veterans recovering, been to Walter Reed, been to the rehab,
8 seen the new orthopedics that are being done, the vision
9 problems that have been solved that could not be solved
10 before. We still have a lot to be proud of.

11 We have got a lot to be sorry about too. We have
12 dropped the ball in some places. We had not been quite as
13 timely as we should be in terms of appointments. We had not
14 been as easy and accessible as we should be, and we had not
15 been as accommodating as we should be.

16 And I am a businessman. I came out of the real estate
17 business. I was not a doctor or a physician, did not apply
18 those services, but I know when I am sick, I do not feel
19 good, I know what good health feels like. And we want the
20 VA services to be just like home, and we are trying to work
21 to see to it that every veteran that comes home comes home
22 to a VA that wants to give them the love and care they
23 deserve, their mom and daddy would have given them if they
24 were here.

25 So, with that, is Mr. Crenshaw here? Where is he?

1 Mr. Crenshaw, I do not know why I did not recognize you
2 with that handsome face of yours. It is good for me to
3 introduce our special guest today at this hearing.
4 Congressman David Crenshaw to introduce the National
5 Commander of the Disabled American Veterans.

6 Mr. Crenshaw, all yours.

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1 STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DAN CRENSHAW, A
2 REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF TEXAS

3 Mr. Crenshaw. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is an honor
4 to be here. It is an honor to be asked to introduce
5 Commander Nixon. I really appreciate it.

6 Chairman, colleagues, guests, thank you for allowing me
7 to speak before the Joint Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

8 We come together today for the important work of
9 ensuring we keep the promise made to our vets. They have
10 upheld their end, and we must remain vigilant in keeping our
11 promise them. We must make sure we live up to those words
12 written by Abraham Lincoln, "To take care for him who shall
13 have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan." I
14 personally know many of those widows.

15 We must make sure these are not just hollow words. We
16 have an opportunity before us to come up with bipartisan
17 solutions to address the needs of our Nation's warriors,
18 past, present, and future.

19 It is crucial now more than ever as we come out of
20 almost two decades of war. Our veterans today are not like
21 veterans of the past.

22 Neither is the service provided. We have capabilities
23 to connect with veterans to provide care remotely and break
24 the typical mold of veteran care.

25 We also face challenges in meeting the needs of

1 veterans that have changed over time. Education, job
2 training, and other benefits for veterans have evolved.

3 We must ensure that the VA and other veterans service
4 organizations are evolving as well to provide veterans with
5 the tools they need to succeed after the transition.

6 It should also be noted advances in personal protective
7 equipment have significantly increased the survivability of
8 our fighting men and women. I am a result of that.

9 As a result, though, we also have a higher ratio of
10 wounded servicemembers than ever before. In Iraq, there
11 were approximately nine wounded for every one killed. In
12 Afghanistan, almost 11 wounded for every one killed. Again,
13 this is good news. More of us are surviving, but it also
14 means we have more of us to take care of.

15 The increased number of wounded servicemembers and
16 service-connected disabled veterans has increased, and the
17 need the veterans service organizations, such as Disabled
18 American Veterans.

19 Since its founding in 1920, Disabled American Veterans
20 has been a leader in helping servicemembers navigate the
21 transition from service to civilian, ensuring they know and
22 have access to the benefits they earned in service to our
23 Nation.

24 And I am honored today to introduce Disabled American
25 Veterans Commander, a fellow Texan, and a fellow combat-

1 wounded vet, Mr. Dennis Nixon.

2 Mr. Nixon enlisted at the age of 17 and served as a
3 combat engineer and served in Vietnam. He was severely
4 injured and had to undergo multiple surgeries, including an
5 amputation of his leg.

6 Though no longer in the military, Mr. Nixon continued
7 his service, service to his fellow veterans, and his new
8 mission for the next 36 years was as a DAV National Service
9 Officer.

10 Mr. Nixon, thank you for your service and uniform and
11 with DAV.

12 Chairman, colleagues, and guests, I ask that we as a
13 Nation and as individuals never forget the service and
14 sacrifice of such men as Commander Dennis Nixon and the
15 members of disabled American veterans.

16 Thank you.

17 [Applause.]

18 Chairman Isakson. Before you make your remarks, I want
19 to make a few opening statements, if I can.

20 Mr. Crenshaw, you are welcome to stay. Congressman,
21 you are welcome to stay, but if you need to slip out--I know
22 you all have got a vote at 2:30--feel free to. But thank
23 you for being here, and it was a great introduction.

24 Let me just do a few opening remarks very quickly. We
25 are very proud of what the Committees in the House and

1 Senate did in the last 2 years, the MISSION Act,
2 accessibility for veterans unlike any, unparalleled in terms
3 of veterans' appeals improving; accountability in terms of
4 people being let go and not being hired back at some other
5 position, but in fact being gone if they are not worthy of
6 serving in the VA and serving our veterans.

7 We did a lot of tough bills, but it is just the
8 beginning. I will tell you now, every one of you, that our
9 challenge the next 2 years is to see to it that what we
10 passed the last 2 years works.

11 We have nothing to bask in yet. We have all the
12 framework, all the authorizations, all the money we could
13 possibly need to do everything we need to do and pass these
14 laws too, but if we start looking for something else to do
15 before we get them taken care of, then we are going to make
16 a big mistake.

17 Jon Tester and I and Chairmen Roe and Takano and the
18 others have pledged ourself to see to it that we make the VA
19 work for the veterans. That is what we are going to do, and
20 Republicans veterans, Democratic veterans, independent
21 veterans, all veterans. But make sure the changes we have
22 made work and make sure if you are having problems, you call
23 us, that you get an answer, and we respond to it. Make sure
24 that you respond to us when we call and ask you to get the
25 word out.

1 I will tell you one thing about the VSOs. You
2 underrate your effectiveness in getting the word out to
3 veterans. You have great effectiveness, and so sometimes
4 Chairman Tester and I--or Vice Chairman Tester and I will
5 call on you to help us get the word out as well because
6 there are a lot of things we are going to have to do to
7 bring them over the top.

8 We got some tough challenges ahead of us. I am going
9 to talk about two or three of them real quick to kind of
10 save a lot of debate later on.

11 As all of you know, the House passed almost
12 unanimously, the Blue Water Navy benefit. The Senate almost
13 passed it, with one dissenting vote that kept us from going
14 to the floor.

15 Two weeks after the final gavel rung on that, the
16 circuit courts throughout the previous order by the VA and
17 established for all intents and purposes, the Blue Water
18 Navy.

19 We have got 30 days to go before that is a final
20 decision. If it is a final decision, then Blue Water Navy
21 will have been done. The surface water Vietnam veterans
22 will have the benefit everybody else had, and all of us will
23 be very happy.

24 We will have a big job to do. That is finding all the
25 money to pay for the benefits, which you are going to have

1 what you are supposed to have, and if by chance it does not
2 pass, if by chance the VA does appeal, then we will go right
3 back. And we have already talked about this, both the
4 Chairman and Ranking Members. We will go right back and
5 introduce the legislation and fight just as hard the next 2
6 years as we did the last 2 years to get it done. We are not
7 quitters, and we are going to see to it we get it done. So
8 the point--and I want you to take that one back to all your
9 membership, back in your various States and tell them that.

10 Secondly, we are working very hard to make the VA a
11 very customer-friendly organization, appointments to be
12 timely as they can be, appointments to be--results to be as
13 good as they can be. We want a results-oriented VA. We
14 want to measure accountability and accomplishment of our VA
15 services and see to it every service they get to our
16 veterans is the best it can possibly be.

17 And where choice is an opportunity that allows us to do
18 that, we are going to make choice work, but we are not under
19 any circumstances going to privatize the VA. You need to
20 know that.

21 [Applause.]

22 Chairman Isakson. That is one bug I am going to squash
23 early. I did not do it last year, and I should have. So I
24 am telling you that is it, as long as I am up here, and
25 after that, you can hold whoever it is to the wall. But

1 that discussion is over. We are going to make the VA the
2 only VA, and we are going to make it work. And we are going
3 to empower the VA with private-sector doctors who come in
4 and serve you because you want them to, not because we make
5 you. And if we do that, we will have a great system that
6 works. You will have appointments on a timely basis. We
7 will get you the care you need and the innovation you need,
8 and then life will be wonderful.

9 We are always going to have problems. We are always
10 going to make mistakes. There is nothing wrong with making
11 a mistake as long as you are willing to correct it. There
12 is nothing wrong with having a problem as long as you are
13 willing to address it, and Jon and I and the members on both
14 sides are willing to do exactly that.

15 So if you came to do business and not complain, we
16 welcome you here. If you want to complain, we will show you
17 a place to go later on, and we will worry about that then.

18 [Laughter.]

19 Chairman Isakson. I got to do one selfish thing.
20 Will the veterans from Georgia please stand. God bless you.

21 [Applause.]

22 Chairman Isakson. Tysee [phonetic] from the VA is
23 here. Tysee is a Georgia girl, and I appreciate you being
24 here, Tysee. You take the message back to the hospital what
25 I said, okay? Make sure all of them know that.

1 I want to welcome you all here today. Thank you for
2 your testimony.

3 Commander Nixon, the floor is yours for 10 minutes. If
4 you take more, I am not about to rap a gavel on you, but do
5 not talk all day long.

6 [Laughter.]

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1 STATEMENT OF DENNIS NIXON, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
2 DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; ACCOMPANIED BY JIM
3 MARSZALEK, NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTOR; JOY J. ILEM,
4 NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR; RANDY REESE,
5 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS; J.
6 MARC BURGESS, NATIONAL ADJUTANT; BARRY A.
7 JESINOSKI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL
8 HEADQUARTERS; JOHN KLEINDIENST, NATIONAL DIRECTOR
9 OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE; JEFFREY C. HALL, NATIONAL
10 DIRECTOR OF EMPLOYMENT; AND ELLEN TIMMERMAN, DAV
11 AUXILIARY NATIONAL COMMANDER

12 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 Congressman Crenshaw, thank you for your kind
14 introduction.

15 Chairman Isakson, Chairman Takano, and members of the
16 Committees on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for providing me
17 the opportunity to present the 2019 legislative program of
18 DAV--Disabled American Veterans--an organization of more
19 than 1 million members, all of whom were injured or became
20 ill in wartime service.

21 My full statement thoroughly details DAV's key
22 legislative priorities in the 116th Congress and reports our
23 many accomplishments. I ask that my formal testimony be
24 submitted for the record.

25 I want to start by recognizing those seated at the

1 table with me, as well as some distinguished guests in the
2 audience.

3 DAV National Adjutant CEO, Marc Burgess; National
4 Executive Directors Barry Jesinoski and Randy Reese;
5 National Service Director, Jim Marszalek--

6 Chairman Isakson. Will you all stand when you are
7 recognized, please, so everybody can see where you are.

8 Mr. Nixon. National Adjutant Marc Burgess, National
9 Executive Directors Barry Jesinoski and Randy Reese;
10 National Service Director Jim Marszalek; National
11 Legislative Director Joy Ilem; National Volunteer Services
12 Director John Kleindienst; National Employment Director Jeff
13 Hall; Auxiliary National Commander Ellen Timmerman of New
14 Mexico; Auxiliary National Adjutant Pat Kemper; DAV Senior
15 Vice Commanders Stephen Whitehead of Minnesota; Junior Vice
16 Commanders Donald Day of New York, Andy Marshall of Florida,
17 Joe Parsetich of Montana; and Nancy Espinosa of Utah;
18 National Judge Advocate Mike Dobmeier; immediate past
19 National Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster; and my own
20 personal caregiver, Maxine Nixon, my wife.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Nixon. I ask DAV National Executive Committee
23 members to please stand or raise your hand to be recognized.

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Nixon. Will the members of the National

1 Legislative Interim Committee please stand or raise your
2 hand.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Nixon. And, finally, I would like to recognize the
5 DAV delegation from my home State of Texas.

6 [Applause.]

7 Mr. Nixon. Messrs. Chairmen, ever since I was 4 years
8 old, I knew I wanted to serve our great Nation. In 1964,
9 when I turned 17, with my mother's consent, I enlisted in
10 the Marine Corps.

11 Less than a year later, I began my first tour in
12 Vietnam as a combat engineer. I was a proud Marine, and I
13 reenlisted as a sergeant and was gung ho going into my
14 second combat tour.

15 However, my dream of a military career was cut short on
16 June 5th, 1969. While on patrol near Danang, I tripped a
17 booby trap and was severely injured. I underwent numerous
18 surgeries, ultimately losing my left leg, and was medically
19 retired in 1970. It was a devastating personal blow, as my
20 only plans in life were to serve my beloved Corps, but this
21 ending was also a new beginning for me.

22 During my extensive recovery period at the VA hospital
23 in Big Spring, Texas, I learned about DAV and the free
24 assistance we offer veterans and their families. With the
25 help of a DAV service officer, I was able to get the

1 benefits I earned, which allowed me to focus on my recovery
2 and begin planning a new direction for my future.

3 I was so personally moved by the help I received from
4 DAV that I entered DAV's on-the-job training program, became
5 a service officer myself, and spent the better part of the
6 next four decades assisting my fellow veterans.

7 I strongly agree with my fellow veteran and Hall of
8 Fame coach of the Dallas Cowboys, Tom Landry, who said, "I
9 have learned that something constructive comes from every
10 defeat."

11 Messrs. Chairmen, 100 years ago in 1919 in the
12 aftermath of World War I, millions of American doughboys
13 left Europe's trenches and began returning home. Over 4
14 million served. More than 116,000 lost their lives.
15 Another 200,000 were wounded or gassed, many bearing visible
16 and invisible wounds that would last a lifetime.

17 Although the warriors who fought that war are now
18 gone, new generations of veterans have followed and will
19 continue to follow. We as a Nation must commit to fulfill
20 our promises to all past, present, and future veterans.

21 One of our Nation's most sacred obligations is to
22 provide health care to those who served and whose lives were
23 changed in uniform.

24 Last year, Congress approved the VA MISSION Act to
25 replace the Choice Program, expand access and strengthen the

1 VA's health care system.

2 VA just proposed regulations to implement that law,
3 including new access standards that will provide options for
4 using community care when VA care is not reasonably
5 accessible.

6 We want all enrolled veterans to have timely access to
7 care; however, VA must be able to deliver what it promises.
8 If VA's proposed regulations are adopted, will the private
9 sector be ready to handle the large influx of new veteran
10 population? Will VA be ready to coordinate the care of
11 veterans using both VA and private facilities? And will the
12 VA have enough funding to meet the new obligations of the
13 MISSION Act while continuing to full fund VA health care, or
14 will VA be forced to divert funding from its hospitals and
15 clinics to pay for community care? These are critical
16 questions that still need answers.

17 But let me be crystal-clear on one point. We will not
18 stand for cutting services or closing hospitals that
19 disabled veterans depend on.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Nixon. The VA MISSION Act also included a historic
22 expansion of VA Caregiver Program for veterans severely
23 injured before September 11th, 2001. We thank both
24 Committees for making this happen and ask for your help to
25 ensure the VA implements this law properly and on time.

1 In addition, we continue to call on Congress and the VA
2 to include not just severely injured veterans, but also
3 veterans whose serious disabilities were caused by service-
4 connected illness.

5 [Applause.]

6 Mr. Nixon. Another critical priority for DAV is
7 ensuring our women veterans have equitable access to health
8 care and benefits.

9 Last year, DAV released a special report, "Women
10 Veterans: The Journey Ahead," which included 45 specific
11 policy recommendations. We call on both Committees to hold
12 hearings on women veterans, consider our recommendations,
13 and pass legislation strengthening women veterans' health
14 care and benefits.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Nixon. We also need Congress to finally end the
17 injustice that exists for Blue Water Navy veterans of the
18 Vietnam War.

19 In January, an appellate court ruled that Congress
20 clearly meant to include Blue Water Navy veterans for
21 benefits related to Agent Orange. It is not yet known if VA
22 will appeal this decision, and we have urged them to accept
23 the ruling. However, regardless of whether it is appealed,
24 Congress should still move forward and pass Blue Water Navy
25 regulation.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Nixon. We also need help from Congress to prevent
3 a similar injustice to veterans who were exposed to toxins
4 from burn pits. The VA does not provide any presumption of
5 service connection for diseases related to burn-pit
6 exposure, but research may soon established such medical
7 links.

8 While awaiting scientific studies, Congress should
9 enact legislation to at least concede exposure for all
10 veterans deployed in locations with active burn pits both
11 per and post 9/11. We should never leave veterans waiting
12 decades to receive earned benefits due to exposure suffered
13 by in the defense of our Nation.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Nixon. When Abraham Lincoln gave his second
16 inaugural address, he spoke of those who had borne the
17 battle, but he also made sure to include widows and orphans
18 who had also laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of
19 freedom.

20 To honor our Nation's obligations, we call on Congress
21 to pass legislation to strengthen benefits for surviving
22 spouses and family members of totally disabled veterans,
23 including finally eliminating the offset for DIC and SBP
24 benefits.

25 [Applause.]

1 Mr. Nixon. Messrs. Chairmen, while much of our focus
2 in Washington is on VA programs and policies, DAV's core
3 mission around the Country involves providing direct service
4 to veterans and their families.

5 DAV represents over 1 million disabled veterans free of
6 charge. Just last year, our National Service Program filed
7 over 200,000 new claims for benefits, more by far than any
8 other organization.

9 Our Disaster Relief Program granted more than \$1.2
10 million to veterans impacted by hurricanes, tornadoes,
11 floods, volcanoes, and fires in California, Georgia, Kansas,
12 Texas, North Carolina, and Puerto Rico.

13 The 23,000 DAV and DAV Auxiliary volunteers provided
14 more than 1.3 million volunteer hours to hospitalized
15 veterans in VA facilities, saving taxpayers more than \$33.5
16 million.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Nixon. In 2018, DAV volunteer drivers spent over
19 1.4 million hours transporting veterans to 630,000 VA
20 medical appointments.

21 In less than 5 years, our National Employment Program
22 has helped over 130,000 veterans and their spouses receive
23 job offers.

24 And DAV's Charitable Service Trust has awarded more
25 than \$112 million in grants to organizations supporting

1 veterans over the past three decades. That is who the DAV
2 is, and that is what we do.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Nixon. Messrs. Chairmen, we gave a saying in
5 Texas: "Never miss a good opportunity to shut up."

6 [Laughter.]

7 Mr. Nixon. So let me conclude with the words of
8 another fellow Texan, Roger Staubach, a Navy veteran who
9 served in Vietnam and began his legendary career for the
10 Dallas Cowboys 50 years ago. Roger said, "All of us get
11 knocked down, but it is resiliency that really matters. All
12 of us do well when things are going well, but the thing that
13 distinguishes us is the ability to do well in times of great
14 stress, urgency, and pressure."

15 To me, those words describe perfectly the men and women
16 I served with and those I have served since. They are the
17 ones who inspire me. They are the reason that I and my DAV
18 brothers and sisters in this room are asking you to help us
19 fulfill the promises to the men and women who served.

20 May God bless all of who have stood, are standing, or
21 will stand in defense of this great Nation, and may God
22 bless the United States of America. Thank you.

23 [Applause.]

24 [The prepared statement of Mr. Nixon follows:]

25

1 Chairman Isakson. Commander Nixon, that was a great
2 testimony, and I want to add one quote, if I can, to your
3 list of quotes. Dizzy Dean also said, "It is not bragging
4 if you done it."

5 [Laughter.]

6 Chairman Isakson. And the job you all did for America
7 as members of the armed services and the job our uniformed
8 soldiers do today makes the difference in our Country and
9 any country on the face of this earth. So God bless you.
10 God bless those you represent. Thanks for coming today.

11 I am going to now turn to the Chairman from the House
12 and then the Ranking Member from the Senate, and then we
13 will go to other members for questions.

14 Let me introduce both of them at the same time and then
15 let them make their opening remarks.

16 Is that all right with you?

17 Mr. Takano. That is fine.

18 Chairman Isakson. First from the House, our new
19 Chairman in the House, Chairman Takano, who has done a great
20 job. I have enjoyed working with him and look forward to
21 working with him in the next 2 years.

22 And then my big buddy--and I mean that literally--

23 [Laughter.]

24 Chairman Isakson. --Jon Tester from Montana who has
25 done a terrific job for the last 4 years working together

1 with me to see to it that we delivered for our veterans.

2 First, Mr. Takano, it is your floor, and then, Jon
3 Tester, you will follow.

4 OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. TAKANO

5 Mr. Takano. Well, good afternoon, and thank you,
6 Chairman Isakson. And thank you and welcome, Commander
7 Nixon. I understand Mr. Crenshaw, a fellow Texan,
8 introduced you, and I was not here for that. I apologize.
9 I love California, but I have learned not to mess with
10 Texas.

11 [Laughter.]

12 Mr. Takano. So welcome to each and every DAV member in
13 the room and to those who could not join us in person but
14 are watching from home. We welcome you too.

15 I want to thank each of you, and that is more than 1
16 million DAV members for your service to our Country and your
17 continued service to our veterans.

18 Before I get rolling here, are there any Californians
19 in the room?

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Takano. All right. All right. I want to give a
22 special shout-out to Dan Contreras, California Adjutant,
23 DAV, from Sherman Oaks, California. Thank you for your
24 service, sir.

25 Commander, I want to let you know that your National

1 Staff is the best in the business. Their thorough knowledge
2 of the issues facing veterans and their tireless commitment
3 to improving the lives of veterans and their families guide
4 our policymaking here in Washington.

5 The success of our collective effort to care for
6 veterans depends on building and maintaining trust and
7 communication between Members of Congress and with
8 organizations like DAV.

9 I know that you join me in fostering continued
10 bipartisanship and partnership in the care of our Nation's
11 veterans, and as you pointed out in your testimony, and I
12 agree, we are once again approaching a critical point in
13 time, a crossroads that will determine how well our Nation
14 fulfills its promise to our veterans.

15 Over the past couple of years, several landmark laws
16 have been passed by Congress. Now the question is how will
17 these laws be implemented. We must ensure that the progress
18 we have made is not lost. The foundation of trust and
19 communication that produced recent achievements like the
20 MISSION Act and Appeals Modernization must be continued in
21 the coming months to ensure what VA implements is in the
22 spirit of what your organization expects.

23 So your priorities are my priorities. We have solemn
24 responsibilities to care for all Blue Water veterans, to
25 expand the Caregiver Program, and ensure there is equitable

1 health care for our minority and women veterans. These are
2 just a handful of small things we can do to uphold our end
3 of the bargain. That those who fight for our Country
4 receive health care and disability benefits, the most
5 fundamental things that veterans deserve after answering our
6 Nation's call to serve.

7 So I look forward to your testimony today, and again,
8 thank you and the members of the DAV for the sacrifice all
9 of you made for this Country and the services you continue
10 to provide to the veterans community. Words cannot express
11 my gratitude for your work.

12 Thank you, and I yield back the balance of my time, Mr.
13 Chairman.

14 Chairman Isakson. Senator Tester.

15 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

16 Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good
17 afternoon.

18 Commander Nixon, thank you very, very much for being
19 here today. I appreciate you. I appreciate the DAV. I
20 appreciate your leadership team that you have brought in
21 today and all the members of the DAV. I do not want you to
22 have to give more money, but if you so choose, it is fine.
23 Your legislative staff does very well for this organization.
24 They are topnotch.

25 [Applause.]

1 Senator Tester. And in your line of leadership is a
2 great veteran. Montana has got a lot of great veterans, but
3 I am telling you that Joe Parsetich is the Third Junior Vice
4 Commander. They do not make them like Joe anymore. So,
5 Joe, welcome to Washington, D.C., and thank you for your
6 leadership on behalf of veterans, both in Montana and
7 nationwide.

8 Commander, I have said this many times, but Congress
9 needs to take its cues from you, the veterans who have
10 served, the veterans who depend upon the VA for health care
11 and education and housing benefits. Why? Because VSOs know
12 better than anyone how the VA is performing across this
13 Country and what improvements should be made on behalf of
14 the veterans and their families.

15 Concerns from the DAV and others about a lack of
16 transparency and engagement from the VA should be alarming
17 to everyone. It is alarming to me. After all, your members
18 are beneficiaries of VA health care and utilize VA programs
19 every single day.

20 Listening to veterans should not simply be a courtesy
21 from the VA. It should be mandatory.

22 Commander, we need to hear your views on how the VA
23 needs to address the dramatic number of personnel vacancies,
24 on gender disparities at the VA and what can be done to
25 provide more equitable treatment of women, on whether the VA

1 is doing enough to address the unacceptable rate of veteran
2 suicides, on whether the long-awaited expansion of VA
3 Caregivers Supports Program will occur on time or be
4 hindered by more IT-related problems.

5 But, most importantly, we need to know whether you
6 believe implementation of the VA MISSION Act, the largest
7 overhaul of veterans health care in a generation, is being
8 carried out as Congress intended and as veterans deserve.

9 I would note that the Independent Budget cites
10 implementation of the MISSION Act as the single most
11 important issue before the 116th Congress. There is real
12 reason for concern.

13 From the veterans community in Congress, the recently
14 proposed access standards will steer a disproportionate
15 amount of veterans and taxpayer dollars into the private
16 sector, and despite language in the MISSION Act, it is clear
17 the VA does not intend on holding community providers to the
18 same standards as we hold VA providers. So it will end up
19 sending more veterans in the communities for lower quality
20 care while being unable to ensure that they get it in a
21 timely manner. To top it off, nobody can tell us how many
22 veterans will ultimately be impacted by these access
23 standards or how much it will cost.

24 All we know is that the community care is more
25 expensive than the VA care, and that billions have been paid

1 to third-party administrators, money that should have gone
2 directly to improving the lives of veterans, but it did not.
3 It went to third-party administrators.

4 The VA refers to concerns about hollowing out the VA
5 health care as false and predictable, but there is not a
6 soul in this room that does not know that they are
7 potentially very real.

8 Veterans deserve more than that. They deserve the
9 truth, and they deserve a system that works, a system that
10 is built and improved with the input from the DAV and
11 others.

12 Commander Nixon, we are here today to gather input, and
13 I want to welcome you. It is an honor to have you in front
14 of this Joint Committee on behalf of not only your
15 organization, but of every disabled veteran in this Country.

16 Thank you.

17 [Applause.]

18 Chairman Isakson. I know the House is going to have
19 votes in a few minutes. So I am going to start questions
20 with some of the House members that are here and leave the
21 Chairs until the end because you all have sacrificed to be
22 here, and I hope you are still here because I do not know
23 everybody by facial recognition that I should. And I
24 apologize for that. So if I call out the wrong name in the
25 wrong order, just let me know. Hopefully, I am right on the

1 first one.

2 Congressman Cisneros. He is gone. While I have
3 screwed up already, Commander.

4 [Laughter.]

5 Chairman Isakson. Congressman Luria. Gone? Oh, that
6 is you. Well, you are beautiful. That is good.

7 [Laughter.]

8 Chairman Isakson. Congressman Luria.

9 Ms. Luria. Well, thank you, and thank you, Commander
10 Nixon, for being here and for all the work that you do to
11 represent the veterans, one of whom I am myself. After
12 serving 20 years in the Navy, it was a DAV representative at
13 Naval Station Norfolk who helped me file all my paperwork,
14 and I really appreciate--

15 [Applause.]

16 Ms. Luria. I really appreciate your presence around
17 the Country and in our communities and continuing to help
18 veterans and look forward to working with you toward that
19 goal.

20 I had an opportunity recently to sit down with
21 Secretary Wilkie and talk about the goals moving forward for
22 veterans and specifically highlighted the issues relative to
23 female veterans because there are more women who have served
24 now and who are receiving care from the VA, and I will be
25 serving. I am honored to serve as the Chair of the

1 Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Committee in the
2 House, and I look forward to working with all of your
3 members towards those issues and specifically making sure
4 that we get it right with regards to the Blue Water
5 veterans.

6 And thank you again for being here today.

7 [Applause.]

8 Chairman Isakson. I am going a little bit out of
9 order, but I am going to alternate Republican and Democrat.

10 Ms. Hirono.

11 Senator Hirono. Thank you very much, and thank you to
12 each and every one of you who have come from all across the
13 Country. Probably, every State must be represented here; is
14 that right? Yes, I see the nods.

15 And I would like to give a special shout-out to two
16 people from Hawaii because they have to go across an ocean
17 to get here. So, Julian Crawford and Ed Kawamura, if you
18 are here, aloha to your guys.

19 So, Commander Nixon, last year Congress passed, and the
20 President signed, the VA MISSION Act to overhaul the Choice
21 Program and to consolidate other VA care in the community
22 programs, and I certainly appreciate DAV's work with
23 Congress to help craft this legislation to make sure that it
24 strikes the right balance between access to community care
25 and investment in VA internal capacity.

1 I also echo DAV's call for the law to be implemented in
2 an open and collaborative process, as it was intended.

3 You said in your testimony that it is important that
4 the new access standards developed under the law are, and to
5 quote you, "realistically achievable and clinically
6 appropriate."

7 The VA recently announced that access standards would
8 be based on average drive time and appointment wait times at
9 the VA. Do you think that these proposed access standards
10 achieve the realistic and clinically appropriate standard
11 that you are looking for?

12 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, Congresswoman for that question,
13 and for the answer, I think I will defer to the Executive
14 Director of the Washington Office, Mr. Reese.

15 Senator Hirono. Certainly.

16 Mr. Reese. Thank you again.

17 In regards to the proposed new access standards,
18 regulations just recently came out. We have quite a chore
19 ahead of us to understand the depth of those regulations and
20 the actual impact.

21 The wait times for the primary mental health care being
22 20 days and all specialty care, 28 days; travel time and
23 distance for primary and mental health, 30 minutes; and all
24 specialty care, 60 minutes, while these sound like average,
25 would work throughout the Nation, we have serious concerns

1 that these are arbitrary, no different than was created
2 previously.

3 Unfortunately, with the absence of the market
4 assessments, we are not sure that the care would actually be
5 there if veterans are referred, and even if they are
6 referred, that it is going to be the quality care that we
7 have expectations of our VA to deliver. So we have serious
8 concerns at this point, and we will certainly be back here
9 to inform you if we have concerns that arise from our
10 review. But until the details actually come forward, it is
11 very difficult to say anything more than these are
12 arbitrary, no different than we had under the Choice
13 Program.

14 Senator Hirono. Well, thank you very much for making
15 sure that the changes we made actually have the effect of
16 providing the kind of care that the veterans deserve.

17 I am interested in the focus on women veterans, and of
18 course, the focus on all veterans, but particularly for the
19 women.

20 I wanted to find out, Commander--I know that women
21 veterans are at a higher risk for suicide relative to
22 nonveteran women peers. Do you think VA's suicide
23 prevention and mental health efforts are adequately tailored
24 to women veterans?

25 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, ma'am, and that is certainly a

1 major concern of ours as well. And I would refer that to
2 Legislative Director Joy Ilem for a response.

3 Senator Hirono. And in your response, I would really
4 appreciate it if you could advise us to how Congress can
5 improve the care that we provide or that we all provide for
6 the growing population of women veterans.

7 Ms. Ilem. Thank you, Senator.

8 You know, we certainly--this has been a critical
9 priority issue for DAV, making sure that our women veterans
10 have access to high-quality and timely care, and especially
11 taking into consideration all of the factors that can
12 affect--render them homeless, substance use disorder
13 problems, MST issues, all contributing factors that can be
14 the consequence of these higher suicide rates among this
15 population.

16 We want the unique needs of this population to be met,
17 and while VA has been working towards that effort, they have
18 had an increasing women veteran population. Certainly,
19 there is more that can be done, and I know that we have
20 outlined and we have spoken before about our report, "Women
21 Veterans: The Journey Ahead," and this is a critical issue.

22 We really hope that VA, this VA Secretary is going to
23 step up to the plate and make sure that our women veterans
24 have equal access to the very specialized benefits VA offers
25 and including in mental health services, but more, even more

1 critically, that they really meet their unique needs.

2 Senator Hirono. Thank you.

3 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Senator Hirono.

5 Senator Boozman from Arkansas.

6 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
7 you all for being here.

8 Commander, we appreciate your words and you being here
9 representing, you and your team, all of those scattered
10 throughout the Country that just do a tremendous job. You
11 bringing up here priority issues, again, making sure that we
12 are on the right track.

13 Nobody does a better job working year-round to help our
14 veterans with their various things that come up.

15 In Arkansas, they do a tremendous job. I had the
16 opportunity of meeting with some of our members earlier.
17 Where are you guys at? Are you here?

18 [No response.]

19 Senator Boozman. They are out messing around.

20 [Laughter.]

21 Senator Boozman. I will tell you, though, I was
22 thinking the greatest gift that you have given us today is
23 the standing room only. We are up here. This Committee is
24 very bipartisan, as you know. Veterans are not Democrats
25 and Republicans as far as the issues that we are dealing

1 with, but to look out and see all of you all covering these
2 offices on the House side and the Senate side, talking to
3 your representatives, talking to the people that are making
4 these decisions, telling them how important these things
5 are, there is just nothing that is better.

6 The only thing that might be better is the Auxiliary,
7 and we do appreciate you all very, very much.

8 [Applause.]

9 Senator Boozman. I would like to focus on a couple of
10 questions that you mentioned--implementation of the MISSION
11 Act, making sure that it goes smoothly, and then also making
12 sure that the women, our women veterans, are getting the
13 care and the resources that they need.

14 You talked about community care. The ultimate judge is
15 going to be the fact as to whether or not it meets the needs
16 of the veterans, and certainly, that is common sense. You
17 encouraged the VA to get out and talk with veterans, do
18 outreach programs, things like that.

19 I think Secretary Wilkie has done a good job when you
20 compare to others. His listening sessions have been good.

21 Can you talk a little bit about the collaboration so
22 far? Have you all been pleased with it? Do we need to push
23 him to do additional things as we go forward?

24 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, sir. That is an excellent
25 question, and I would like for Director Reese to address

1 that issue.

2 Mr. Reese. Thank you, Mr. Boozman, for that question.

3 To draw a contrast in regards to transparency and our
4 collaborations with the Department of Veterans Affairs, I
5 would first say that the model of collaboration would be the
6 Appeals Modernization process.

7 In that process, VSOs, Congress, VBA, the Board of
8 Veterans Appeals all went together, worked out our
9 differences, had a good consensus document to actually great
10 good law. That is what we like to see, and that is how we
11 had an expectation to be in this process.

12 Early in the MISSION Act process, as you know, DAV,
13 along with other stakeholders, played a vital role along
14 with Members of Congress and the VA to shape what was
15 actually delivered as the MISSION Act.

16 Unfortunately, since that time, there has been an
17 absolute block-out in regards to our ability to have
18 deliberate collaborations and have substantive and
19 meaningful feedback to the VA.

20 While we have been briefed by the VA, while they have
21 certainly kept us as far in the weeds as they want us to be,
22 we have not been able to get engaged in the actual process
23 and the policymaking and the roll-out.

24 And an example of that, if I may, is the access
25 standards. We have played no collaborative role in regards

1 to the creation of those access standards. Veterans of this
2 Nation played no role in the creation of those access
3 standards. So right now, the access standards were created
4 behind closed doors, and so far, there has been no
5 transparency as to why they were created the way that they
6 were, other than the law of average. That is unacceptable
7 from DAV's perspective.

8 Senator Boozman. Very good. And that is--

9 [Applause.]

10 Senator Boozman. That is certainly very helpful as far
11 as the input.

12 Very quickly, because I have just got just a second--in
13 fact, I will go ahead and in the interest of time. There
14 are so many people up here who want to have comments and
15 questions, but we will be submitting a question that
16 basically asks in regard to the women's issues that we have.

17 Myself and Senator Tester introduced the Deborah
18 Sampson Act. We appreciate your support. We are going to
19 be working very hard on that and again appreciate you all.

20 The question that I will be asking is where do you see
21 the greatest need as we go forward, and then what is the
22 low-hanging fruit? What are some of the things that are
23 relatively easy to get done as we look to try and solve some
24 of those problems?

25 So thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate you.

1 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Senator Boozman.

2 Let me say for everybody at the dais, I am going to
3 take the following order. If I have got somebody out of
4 order, I apologize, but I have been trying to keep up with
5 the flow back and forth.

6 But next would be Ms. Sinema from the Senate. After
7 Ms. Sinema, Mr. Tillis from the Senate, and then Mr.
8 Blumenthal from the House. Is that satisfactory to
9 everybody?

10 Senator Blumenthal. I am still in the Senate, Mr.
11 Chairman.

12 Chairman Isakson. I am sorry. Well, it was a House
13 guy in your seat beforehand.

14 [Laughter.]

15 Chairman Isakson. Is that okay with you timewise,
16 though? Is that satisfactory for you to do in 5 minutes?

17 Senator Blumenthal. If Senator Sinema has an
18 obligation, I am happy to yield to her.

19 Chairman Isakson. You smooth devil.

20 [Laughter.]

21 Chairman Isakson. Senator Blumenthal.

22 Senator Blumenthal. Are you sure?

23 My name is Richard Blumenthal, U.S. Senator from
24 Connecticut.

25 Do we have any folks from Connecticut here?

1 [No response.]

2 Senator Blumenthal. Well, I guess they are out messing
3 around with the folks from Arkansas.

4 [Laughter.]

5 Senator Blumenthal. I want to thank all of you for
6 being here. I want to thank all you do for veterans day in
7 and day out, and I want to say how grateful I am to the
8 folks who are whistleblowers here, the folks who are
9 disappointed on their behalf but also possibly on other
10 fellow veterans' behalf. And they call our offices. That
11 is a service that is critically important.

12 You are our eyes and ears, literally, and I will just
13 give you one example. My office heard that the West Haven
14 Hospital, our VA hospital in Connecticut, was closed for 3
15 months. Closed. Not doing any surgery. Do you think the
16 VA told us? No.

17 We learned also from whistleblowers that our VA
18 hospital, even after they reopened, was working at only
19 about 30 percent of capacity. They were sending people for
20 surgery to all kinds of other hospitals because the Surgical
21 Sterilization Facility was unable to do the work necessary
22 to do the surgery. Thirty percent of capacity, that is the
23 date at which they were operating. Do you think the VA told
24 us about that? No.

25 We heard about it from you. We heard about it from

1 veterans who came forth as whistleblowers, and we are
2 working right now pounding the VA to expedite the Surgical
3 Sterilization Facility so that it is at 100 percent and
4 fully fulfilling its responsibility.

5 So I just want to urge every one of you to continue
6 calling us. You are doing us a service. You are doing
7 fellow veterans as service. You are not complaining
8 arbitrarily. You are helping.

9 We also learned, for example, about the VA lacking
10 adequate outreach to veterans who potentially could be at
11 risk of suicide. In this great Nation, greatest nation in
12 the history of the world, veterans still commit suicide at
13 the rate of about 20 a day.

14 John McCain and I authored a measure, bipartisan,
15 called the Clay Hunt Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, which
16 prioritized this issue.

17 Tomorrow, I am going to be joining with Senator Boozman
18 and Senator Sullivan, another bipartisan measure, called the
19 Reach Every Veteran in Crisis Act, new legislation that
20 would improve and ensure VA oversight, suicide prevention,
21 media, outreach, campaigns, so we reach more of these
22 veterans who are at risk of suicide.

23 So let me ask you, Commander Nixon. Do you believe the
24 VA should be required to set targets to evaluate the
25 efficiency of its suicide prevention outreach campaigns, and

1 would you support a measure like the Reach Every Veteran in
2 Crisis Act?

3 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, Senator.

4 We certainly do, and we certainly would. But I would
5 like to ask Executive Director Randy Reese to elaborate.

6 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you.

7 Mr. Reese. Thank you, Mr. Blumenthal.

8 As you know, veteran suicide is something that is a
9 nationwide crisis. Unfortunately, a lot of those veterans
10 are not in any of the networks that are formalized for the
11 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. We all as a community
12 have to come together in order to bring the results and to
13 resolve some of the issues with our veteran suicide across
14 the Nation.

15 VA did set forth as a part of its mission last year,
16 Recovery Engagement and Coordinating of Health for Veterans
17 Enhanced Treatment," or REACH VET. The roll-out of that
18 program--and certainly, there was plenty of media around the
19 fact that some of the resources that was actually
20 appropriated for purposes of suicide prevention and
21 awareness had not been used.

22 So it concerns us greatly that resources are available
23 and have not been necessarily used for the purposes for
24 which they were appropriated by the Congress.

25 In regards to the details of the legislation that you

1 set forth, I will ask Joy Ilem to weigh in there.

2 Joy.

3 Ms. Ilem. Thank you.

4 Well, we would certainly love to take a look at the
5 legislation, but I am confident that we would be able to
6 support that.

7 Certainly, DAV members would pass resolutions in
8 support of doing everything we can to make sure that
9 veterans have ready access to mental health services, and we
10 know the collaborative efforts that have been undertaken.
11 But it has been frustrating that there are still the number
12 of suicides of our veteran population, within our veteran
13 population.

14 So we want to do everything. We want to be part of the
15 solution, and when you talk about veterans service
16 organizations, how they can help--and I think the Chairman
17 had mentioned this as well--we are critical. We are the
18 people, the eyes and ears, that are out there, helping our
19 fellow veterans and making sure that we do not let anybody
20 down. That anybody who needs help has access to that.

21 So we look forward to working with your staff and the
22 introduction of that bill.

23 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you very, very much.

24 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

25 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Mr. Blumenthal.

1 Appreciate it.

2 We are going to go to Senator Tillis, then Senator
3 Sinema, and then Senator Cassidy, in that order.

4 Senator Tills.

5 Senator Tillis. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you
6 all for being here. Your past service and your current
7 service, we appreciate it. You are a very, very important
8 part of the feedback loop that we have on trying to do
9 better by way of our veterans.

10 I also want to thank Senator Tester. Over the past few
11 years since I have been on Veterans' Affairs Committees with
12 the blessing and encouragement of the Chair, we have had an
13 opportunity to get together and meet with the VA through
14 Secretary McDonald, Secretary Shulkin, and now Secretary
15 Wilkie, to try and keep track of some of the
16 implementations.

17 Mr. Reese, at some point, I would like to get your
18 feedback, and maybe separate from this meeting, but things
19 that we should bring back to those briefings to make sure
20 that there is a good feedback loop.

21 What we are trying to do is make sure the milestones
22 are being achieved, and more importantly, if we make other
23 policy decisions that actually get in the critical path of
24 what we have already committed to, that we all do that
25 knowingly, because what happens here in Congress is you pass

1 a bill, and then you think about something new that is
2 disruptive to what you have already authorized the
3 Department to do. And we have got to figure out how to
4 layer those in, and I think your feedback would be very
5 helpful.

6 Senator Tester mentioned something. I remember my
7 buddy, a Marine, Dan Sullivan from Alaska. He and I were
8 talking one evening at dinner. I think it was on veterans
9 issues. He said, "Tom, do you know I have more veterans per
10 capita in Alaska than any other State?" and I said, "Dan, do
11 you know I have got more veterans in North Carolina than you
12 have got people?"

13 [Laughter.]

14 Senator Tillis. Now, I will tell you the reason why--
15 one time, it was just banter between two friends, but the
16 reason that that is important is to show the vast
17 differences from State to State and the challenges we have.

18 I, for one, do not think that we can have a one-size-
19 fits-all. What works for a State that literally spans the
20 geography of the United States with a population of less
21 than a million may not work for a State of 10 million that
22 is fairly compact.

23 So I want to make sure that you all--on a partisan
24 basis. There is nobody on this Committee that has any
25 intention of privatizing the VA and sending everyone who

1 needs a referral to a community, a non-VA provider,
2 somewhere through Choice, unless it can be proven over time
3 that that is what the veteran wants and is producing the
4 outcomes that we demand.

5 So we are going to need your help in continuing the
6 work on it, but make no mistake about it. I do not think
7 there is anyone here--and I know that you all interact with
8 my office and other offices. There is no one here
9 advocating for privatization and walking away.

10 It is always important to me when we have these
11 meetings to just underscore the point.

12 I was at a health care center in Kernersville, North
13 Carolina, late last week, a 300,000-square-foot facility
14 that came online, along with two other ones, a million
15 square feet in health care centers in North Carolina over
16 the past couple years. They are extraordinary.

17 What I also want to say is to the VA staff who are
18 working, most of them out there and the health care
19 providers, they are good people. They care about you all.
20 Many of them are veterans themselves.

21 So we should also make sure that when we have--as
22 Senator Blumenthal has said, we have lapses, and we have
23 challenges, and when we have lapses and challenges,
24 whistleblowers, blow your whistles. But more--as
25 importantly, make sure if you are in North Carolina, you are

1 calling my office because I will guarantee you the vast
2 majority of the cases we carry in my office in North
3 Carolina are veterans' cases. Some of the best moments and
4 the best battery recharges we have is when we have to open
5 up a big old can of whoop ass on somebody who is not doing
6 their job.

7 [Laughter.]

8 Senator Tillis. And so--

9 [Applause.]

10 Senator Tillis. So I have got to go to a Senate Armed
11 Services hearing. I hope to get back for the next panel,
12 but I want you all to know that Senator Tester and I are
13 trying to watch this implementation on a monthly basis. I
14 want your feedback. I want your questions, and there may be
15 a variety of reasons why it is challenging to do it with any
16 one service organization if you do not do it for all of
17 them. I can think of some logistical reasons, but at the
18 end of the day, you need to get your questions answered, and
19 if it is not through direct interaction with the VA, I think
20 it can be through interaction that you will have with my
21 office, Senator Tester's office, and members of this
22 Committee.

23 The last thing I got to ask, do we have anybody from
24 North Carolina here? There you go.

25 [Applause.]

1 Senator Tillis. Well, thank you all. Again, thank you
2 for your service.

3 And, Director Reese, I specifically want to follow up
4 on your experience, but rather than take the time of the
5 Committee, if we can get in touch with my office--Bill Bode
6 or Joey of my staff, and myself--I would like to have that
7 as a subject for mine and Senator Tester's next meeting.

8 Thank you all. God bless you, and thank you for being
9 here.

10 [Applause.]

11 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Senator Tillis.

12 Senator Sinema.

13 Senator Sinema. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Chairman.

14 I want to start by just talking about how grateful I am
15 to have been appointed to this Committee as a new member of
16 the United States Senate. It is a great honor and a
17 privilege to serve on the Veterans' Affairs Committee with
18 great leadership of Senator Isakson and Senator Tester. So
19 it is really a delight and a privilege to be here.

20 I want to thank each and every one of you who have
21 traveled from all over the Country to join us here today,
22 and I will ask are there any Arizona veterans who are here
23 today, if you would please stand. That is right.

24 [Applause.]

25 Senator Sinema. See, Mr. Chairman, I already knew the

1 answer to my question because my guys sit in the front row,
2 so--

3 [Laughter.]

4 Senator Sinema. Although he is supporting the wrong
5 university, but that is okay. It is all right. My sister
6 went to U of A, and she is pretty smart too. Yeah.

7 Mr. Chairman and folks who are here with us today, I
8 just want to express my extreme gratitude to the DAV and to
9 the other veterans service organizations that we will be
10 hearing from and supporting this week.

11 The work that you all do in my home State of Arizona to
12 assist veterans, particularly those who are facing sometimes
13 a very byzantine and complex process of applying for
14 benefits for recognizing service-related disabilities and
15 the grueling process of going through appeals, would not be
16 possible if it were not for the incredible help of the
17 talented volunteers who help veterans day in and day out.

18 And I can tell you that over the 6 years that I served
19 in the U.S. House representing Arizona's Ninth District, we
20 relied on the men and women of the DAV and the Auxiliary
21 folks to help in this regard, and folks from the DAV served
22 as valuable members of our Veterans Advisory Committee. And
23 I am grateful for that.

24 I also want to just take a moment and thank you for
25 your advocacy for legislation that I know is important to

1 every member of this Committee and both the House and the
2 Senate, and it is my pledge to continue working until we
3 pass legislation that addresses the issue for our Blue Water
4 Navy veterans. These individuals have worked so hard and
5 deserve these benefits and this protection.

6 We passed that bill through the House last year, and I
7 know we will work to get it through the Senate this year.

8 And I am grateful to be able to join my colleagues in
9 cosponsoring the Deborah Sampson Act to make sure that we
10 are addressing the needs of women veterans.

11 In our office, our caseload has increasingly been
12 populated by female veterans who are contacting us, asking
13 for additional assistance in need.

14 So as we move forward in this term, I just want to
15 again thank you for your incredible service to our Country,
16 for your continuing service to your fellow veterans and
17 their family members, and to thank you for the work that you
18 do to help us do our job better and keep us all accountable.

19 So thank you very much, and, Mr. Chairman, I yield
20 back.

21 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Senator Sinema.

22 [Applause.]

23 Chairman Isakson. We are delighted that you joined the
24 Committee this year, so thank you for being a part of it.
25 We appreciate it.

1 Next is Senator Cassidy.

2 Senator Cassidy. Hey, anybody from Louisiana? Oh,
3 that is great. Oh, hey.

4 [Applause.]

5 Senator Cassidy. Yeah. They are the only ones that
6 recognize I have a Mardi Gras tie on. Everybody thinks it
7 is just an ugly tie, but, no, it is Mardi Gras. Happy Mardi
8 Gras, everybody, a week early.

9 Thank you all for being here. I am a physician, a
10 doctor, and one of the things I have been most concerned
11 about is what are we doing about pain management, what are
12 we doing about mental health services.

13 I will compliment both my Chair, Ranking Member, and my
14 colleagues on both sides of the Capitol. That has been a
15 mutual interest.

16 So let me just open it up. How do you feel the VA is
17 implementing all these programs we have put together to
18 stress greater provision of mental health, pain management,
19 helping those with addiction, with perhaps a particular
20 focus upon the increasing number of female veterans?

21 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, sir.

22 I am going to defer that to Director Randy Reese for
23 comment, please.

24 Mr. Reese. Thank you, Senator Cassidy.

25 From a big-picture perspective, the Department of

1 Veterans Affairs has actually taken lead on this. They have
2 done a wide variety of programs. Their opioid program that
3 they have initiated actually has probably benchmarks for the
4 reduction of the use of opioids within the Department of
5 Veterans Affairs.

6 Senator Cassidy. Now, Director Reese, let me ask
7 because this is my opportunity to pick your brain. Now,
8 sometimes I find that the VA does things in an uneven
9 fashion. That there are some places that do it really well
10 and other places, a little bit to be desired. And I see
11 some heads nodding back there, so it might be that that
12 resonates.

13 Any thought about how widespread or how completely
14 implemented it is that these issues are being so well
15 addressed?

16 Mr. Reese. I will ask Legislative Director Ilem, who
17 is a little deeper on that subject, to respond.

18 Ms. Ilem. We did hear complaints early on when VA was
19 reducing the opioid use and prescribing, and one of the
20 problems that we saw was those veterans, many of our
21 members, dealing with chronic pain management, and how VA
22 was doing the step-down.

23 We let VA know immediately this needs to be done in a
24 humane way. There have to be alternatives to that pain
25 management if you are going to reduce or take that person

1 off opioids, specifically when they have prescribed them for
2 maybe decades and they have been on them long term.

3 So many disabled veterans have come, serious injuries,
4 serious wounds, when suddenly they were just told, "We are
5 going to reduce your opioid use, or we are going to try
6 something else." That impacts their ability to work, to
7 function, to be independent.

8 So while we want them to be safe, and we want that, we
9 want to make sure that they are humane in the way that they
10 do it, so we want to work with them.

11 Senator Cassidy. Now, at some point, when I talked to
12 the VA--and this is when Dr. Shulkin was still the head--
13 they had a person power shortage in terms of the ability to
14 adequately address this, and we spoke about different
15 things--telemedicine, tele-mentoring, et cetera. But,
16 again, how uniformly is the VA operating at a higher
17 standard in the experience of your members?

18 Ms. Ilem. I think for pain management, there is still
19 a great deal of variability, and the VA could be doing
20 better.

21 Senator Cassidy. Okay. And what about mental health
22 services?

23 Ms. Ilem. Well, bar none, VA has incredible mental
24 health services, specifically with some very specialized
25 services for veterans' issues dealing with PTSD, military

1 sexual trauma, combat trauma, and others.

2 So while I think that they make a great effort, they
3 have had shortage in mental health providers, which we see
4 happens in the community, private sector as well, but VA has
5 to be able to provide timely care. They have to have men
6 and women that provides those services.

7 Senator Cassidy. So I would love to have your kind of
8 thoughts about solutions.

9 As a physician, I can tell you there is a shortage of
10 psychiatrists, period.

11 Ms. Ilem. Right.

12 Senator Cassidy. And so whatever sector you are in,
13 unless it is maybe Downtown Manhattan where, for whatever
14 reason, they have a really high concentration of mental
15 health professionals--

16 [Laughter.]

17 Senator Cassidy. --everyplace else, there is a
18 shortage.

19 Ms. Ilem. Sure.

20 Senator Cassidy. So, again, knowing that you all are
21 thinking creatively about these issues would like that.

22 And, lastly, I will finish up by asking. We have been
23 really concerned about the suicide issue, as we all are, and
24 we found that the--I am looking at my aide. With the
25 highest frequency of suicide, it is within the first 6

1 months of separation? The first 6 months of separation, and
2 that is oftentimes when the person is not yet kind of fully
3 integrated. You know this better than I.

4 Any thoughts among anybody how we can better reach that
5 group of veterans, new veterans, if you will?

6 Ms. Ilem. Well, we are pleased that VA has brought in
7 a number of new people at their Suicide Prevention Office.

8 The director of that office is coming from DoD, and he
9 is really working in a collaborative effort to be able to do
10 a better handoff, especially for veterans that are really
11 vulnerable or at risk, making sure that they come home, that
12 they know where they can go for help if they need help, but
13 also deploying--having them also work as a group to make
14 sure that they are watching each other.

15 And in the veteran community, that is what we do, try
16 to watch each other's back, make sure if somebody is
17 suffering, somebody is having a hard time, we make sure that
18 they--there is an intervention. We get them the help that
19 they need.

20 So, as far as VA, I hope that they are going to
21 continue that collaborative effort and really have a better
22 way of doing a good handoff during that transition phrase
23 where veterans could be very vulnerable.

24 Senator Cassidy. Well, thank you all, and one more
25 time, Happy Mardi Gras.

1 [Applause.]

2 Chairman Isakson. Let me thank all of you for being
3 here.

4 I will tell you how we are going to do this for just a
5 few minutes. Senator Tester is going to be next, followed
6 by me. I have tried to leave everything to our other
7 members, to give them a chance to have their say.

8 But I do want to say, Director Reese, I want you to
9 listen to me. You were the one making the comments, I
10 think, about the way forward in terms of the access
11 standards.

12 Let me just give you a thought. I think the VA did a
13 good job of having you all in when we were doing the MISSION
14 Act to get to the point where we were before we farmed out
15 the standards and they went away and nobody inside the
16 veterans service organizations were making any comments or
17 allowed any access or any input into what those standards
18 were. I sense that that has been pretty much repeated
19 around the Country.

20 I am trying to prevent a problem happening. If we do
21 not address that up front honestly, then somewhere down the
22 line, it is going to blow up. I sensed it by the
23 spontaneous applause I heard from this corner over here--
24 pardon my finger; I apologize for that--and the spontaneous
25 applause from the back corner back there.

1 We do not need a revolution in the middle of the
2 implementation of the MISSION Act or getting the access
3 standards to work for Choice.

4 So here is what I am going to try and do. I am going
5 to try and create mechanisms for the VSOs to have access and
6 input into the finalization of these standards, which may
7 mean--and I want you to hear this--because the Country is
8 different. Billings is a lot different than Atlanta, and
9 there are lots of differences in between, between our
10 States, our locations, where our veterans are, and where
11 they are not.

12 It is going to mean that some places might have a
13 different standards because of the nature of where their vet
14 is coming from and because of what is actually available in
15 terms of health care and accessible in that area.

16 And we cannot create a situation where there are more
17 popular areas to go than others because of the rules and
18 regulations we come up with. We have got to come up with
19 rules and regulations that make sense, with veterans input,
20 and VSO inputs.

21 So I want you to hear me. I am working towards that
22 right now, and I heard you loud and clear today. And I was
23 hoping I would hear that spontaneously. So Jon and I will
24 work on it with other members of the Committee, and we are
25 going to try and make sure it happens.

1 Now it is really a pleasure for me--and I am going to
2 excuse myself for a second, but I will be back--to introduce
3 my Ranking Member, Jon Tester, who has been a marvelous
4 partner throughout all this effort in the last year, and I
5 appreciate him very much.

6 Senator Tester. And back at you on that, Chairman
7 Isakson. It has been good to work with you, and I support
8 you on the access and input from groups like the DAV. It is
9 critically important.

10 I can almost bet, Commander Nixon, although you did not
11 tell each one of the States the folks behind you are from,
12 that you have got rural America covered and you have got
13 urban America covered and everywhere in between. So your
14 input on these access standards is critical. It is
15 absolutely critical.

16 And, by the way, I would say the same thing for the
17 rest of the VSOs too, but in your case, it is particularly
18 critical because you are disabled veterans. You guys depend
19 upon the VA because, quite frankly, the private sector
20 cannot deliver what the VA does for our disabled veterans.

21 [Applause.]

22 Senator Tester. So, Commander Nixon, I would guess
23 that a majority of your members--do not let me put words in
24 your mouth, but a majority of your members prefer care
25 directly from the VA. Is that a pretty good guess?

1 Mr. Nixon. Yes, sir, I believe it is.

2 Senator Tester. Okay. Now, the question when it comes
3 to access standards in the communities, do you believe that
4 the community providers--does DAV believe the community
5 providers should be held to the same standard at VA
6 providers?

7 Mr. Nixon. Excellent question, and I think I will let
8 Director Reese address that. Thank you.

9 Senator Tester. All righty. Director Reese.

10 Mr. Reese. Thank you, Senator Tester.

11 We absolutely believe that is the case.

12 Senator Tester. Okay. So we did this MISSION Act, and
13 we worked hard on it. We tried to get it right, and now
14 implementation is coming down the pipe, and we have got to
15 get that right.

16 Do you think the VA would support expansion of care in
17 the community if it meant a reduction in quality or
18 timeliness? What I am saying is do you think the VA--or the
19 DAV--I am sorry--would support community expansion of health
20 care for your members if it meant the health care was less
21 quality and less time?

22 Mr. Reese. Absolutely not.

23 Senator Tester. Boy, I will tell you what, if you had
24 said something different, Mr. Director--

25 [Laughter.]

1 Mr. Reese. Well, timely care is important, and I think
2 we all agree with that.

3 High-quality care is the key.

4 Senator Tester. That is correct.

5 Mr. Reese. And the actual measure is going to be
6 positive outcomes.

7 Senator Tester. Yeah.

8 Mr. Reese. The outcomes has got to be equal to or
9 better than the VA, or they have no business being in that
10 private sector.

11 Senator Tester. Yeah.

12 [Applause.]

13 Senator Tester. I would agree, and I am not going to
14 get into staffing. But right now, the VA needs more people.

15 I mean, I talked to their HR guy today, and he is a
16 great guy, by the way. And he understands the challenges,
17 and I think he is going to work hard on it.

18 But the bottom line is if they do not have the
19 staffing, then the quality of VA care goes down too, and we
20 do not want that.

21 I want to talk a little bit about the VA care and the
22 studies around VA care because I think a few years back,
23 there was a lot of information out there that implied that
24 the VA does not have really good health care.

25 Then there was a Dartmouth study that came out that

1 showed that the VA oftentimes outperforms the private
2 sector.

3 There is a Journal of American Medical Association that
4 said wait times were equal or better. The VA had wait times
5 equal or better than the private sector, which would tell me
6 that if we do not--and I say "we"--if the VA does not
7 adequately measure quality and wait times, care could go
8 down.

9 So the question is to just talk to me about that. Who
10 should the VA be listening to? Quite frankly, not being a
11 veteran myself and not having any connection with any of the
12 VSOs, other than being a United States Senator, I think you
13 guys can make the case that DAV depends on the VA more than
14 anybody.

15 So do you think that you have the ability to talk to
16 the VA about those--if there were problems with quality and
17 problems with timeliness, do you have, Director Reese or
18 anybody else, access to the VA to let them know?

19 Mr. Reese. We have access to the VA to certainly give
20 them feedback about findings, but unfortunately, that would
21 be after the fact.

22 Senator Tester. Yes.

23 Mr. Reese. We need to be a part of the actual access
24 standard discussion. Veterans need to be a part. Our local
25 communities need to be a part of that, and DAV and other

1 VSOs need to be a part of those market assessments in
2 advance.

3 Senator Tester. In advance.

4 Do you feel that you have been listened to so far
5 adequately?

6 Mr. Reese. We have not.

7 Senator Tester. Okay. Hopefully--and I do not know if
8 there is anybody here from the VA that is of consequence.

9 Is this being televised? My God, I hope they are
10 listening, okay?

11 [Laughter.]

12 Senator Tester. Because the truth is that statement
13 means a lot right there. I did not make that statement; you
14 made that statement. As a DAV, as somebody who represents
15 disabled veterans all over this Country, your views have to
16 be listened to, and they have to be sought out.

17 [Applause.]

18 Senator Tester. Now, normally, as this moment in time
19 of the Congress, we would be able to solicit your views on
20 the President's Budget Request for the VA. That is not the
21 case today. We are still waiting on the budget.

22 But I would like to provide you, Commander Nixon, for
23 anybody you want to appoint or yourself, on what the DAV's
24 priorities are for the FY '20, fiscal year '20 budget, which
25 is what we are going to be working on.

1 Mr. Nixon. I will give that to Director Reese. Thank
2 you.

3 Senator Tester. You are a busy guy, Director Reese.

4 [Laughter.]

5 Mr. Reese. I am going to delegate some here now.

6 [Laughter.]

7 Mr. Reese. For FY 2020, IB budget recommendations with
8 our partners from the VFW as well as those from the
9 Paralyzed Veterans of America, the total discretionary
10 portion was \$103.3 billion, an increase of \$15.1 billion
11 over FY 2019. And for the first time in the IB's history,
12 this is a recommendation that exceeds \$100 million.

13 I will ask Ms. Ilem to fill you in on the finer details
14 of what that entails.

15 Ms. Ilem. I would just add, without going into
16 specifics on numbers, which can always be difficult, I think
17 the most important thing for DAV moving forward was making
18 sure that we have the sufficient budget for VA to carry out
19 all aspects of the MISSION Act, so not just setting up the
20 community care aspect of network, which is important, but
21 also for making sure that VA's infrastructure, their
22 staffing needs are met, their IT modernization is carried
23 out. It is such a tool for providing health care today.

24 So all of those aspects that are going to improve the
25 VA health care system, modernize it, to make sure it is

1 truly the best health care system for veterans, and all the
2 specialized services VA brings behind it, that is the
3 essential piece for us.

4 And there is a lot of unknowns right now, not only just
5 with the budget, but how the impact of setting up that
6 network is going to be.

7 For example, there has got to be the care coordination
8 piece. We do not want to be paying third-party
9 administrators to do that. We want VA to be the main
10 provider of care, and when they have to have that care
11 outside in the community, we want them to coordinate that
12 care so the veteran is not just on their own.

13 We want the training for the quality they are going to
14 have to provide for those providers in the community, to
15 make sure they have the understanding.

16 You talked about the research that is out there. One
17 research that RAND did, one research indicated--an article
18 noted that only 2 percent of the providers in New York that
19 were surveyed felt that they could take care of the veteran
20 population in a meaningful way.

21 So there is all these other factors, making sure
22 payments go to those in a timely way to the providers so
23 that veterans are not left with bills hanging over their
24 head and having issues with their credit, and that the IT
25 system and all those things are laid out. All of that is

1 what is going to make a difference.

2 Veterans will choose VA whenever possible to get that
3 care there because they know they are getting quality care
4 there if VA is sufficiently funded.

5 Senator Tester. Let me just ask a real quick question
6 because Patty Murray and the Chairman worked really hard to
7 make sure the caregivers are a part of the MISSION Act.
8 Could you just talk about how important that is and how
9 important it is done right in this next budget?

10 Ms. Ilem. Yep. Just absolutely, that is another
11 issue. It has been a critical priority for DAV for so many
12 years, and we are not there yet, but a lot of the budget
13 will be going towards this IT certification to make sure
14 that they can roll out without delay, the expansion of the
15 Caregiver Act.

16 And they have missed one of the first deadlines, but we
17 are hoping that they can catch up. But this is so important
18 to our membership. You have seen. You have been here year
19 after year, hearing from our caregivers how important they
20 are to disabled veterans. And we still have not included
21 those caregivers who have been providing for ill veterans,
22 that have an illness that related in their need for
23 caregivers.

24 So while we appreciate all that has been done, this is
25 a critical part of the MISSION Act, and we are so pleased

1 that that was included. It is so important.

2 Senator Tester. Well, I am one that believes not only
3 is it the right thing to do, but I think that once it gets
4 fully implemented, it will be better quality of life for the
5 veteran. And silly me, I really think it is going to save
6 the taxpayer dollars because it is cheaper. It is cheaper
7 to do it this way.

8 Ms. Ilem. We agree. Thank you.

9 Senator Tester. Yeah. I want to talk about mental
10 health, if I might, Mr. Chairman, just for a second. The
11 Senator from Louisiana talked about it for a little bit.

12 I want to just touch on one thing, and it is a huge
13 issue all over the Country. Montana, unfortunately, leads
14 the Nation in suicide for a number of reasons, whether it is
15 in the private sector, and we are losing far too many
16 veterans.

17 From your perspective, Commander Nixon or whoever you
18 want to have answer this, what is the number one thing that
19 the VA can do to improve how it conducts suicide prevention
20 and mental health outreach, to get these folks before they
21 get to a point where they are going to do something bad?

22 Mr. Nixon. Again, I think I will defer to Director
23 Rees. Thank you.

24 Senator Tester. Okay.

25 Mr. Reese. In regards to suicide, awareness training

1 for all the employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs,
2 the front lines of their employees, the front lines of the
3 VSOs, also using the community resources, the State
4 directors of veterans affairs, county directors of veterans
5 affairs. In some instances, those are the main conduits in
6 the community that would be able to bring them in from the
7 outside and into the resources of the Federal Government.

8 But it is a crisis in America, and all of our citizens
9 have to participate in crisis intervention.

10 Senator Tester. Fair point.

11 Since I still got the podium, I am going to keep going.

12 [Laughter.]

13 Chairman Isakson. I am timing you.

14 Senator Tester. You are timing me? I think I might
15 have run over, but it is okay. These House guys are a bit
16 tardy, so I will take advantage of it.

17 Commander Nixon, I am sure that DAV is playing close
18 attention 2 years ago when the Department of Defense
19 launched its new Electronic Health Record. We know that as
20 the VA looks to implement its own interoperable health
21 record that it is important we get it right, with as little
22 disruption as possible.

23 What is the DAV's biggest concerns about the VA's plan
24 for implementing the new EHR and the impact it will have on
25 veterans?

1 And let me guess. This is going to Director Reese.

2 Mr. Nixon. Well, actually, I was going to pick
3 somebody else, but I will go with Director Reese.

4 [Laughter.]

5 Mr. Reese. In regards to IT, I would first like to say
6 that a number of years ago, probably more than a decade now,
7 IT, the Office of Information Technology, was centralized.
8 And we do have feedback that some of the administrations--
9 all of the administrations--VHA, VBA, and NCA--they have
10 some unmet needs because of that centralization.

11 So we do think that--and we would recommend that the
12 Committees have hearings and find out if that centralized
13 process is actually delivering on the performance that it
14 was supposed to.

15 In regards to the Electronic Health Record, we know
16 that the first issue that has occurred here in 2014, it was
17 challenges with scheduling. Here we are in 2018. The
18 scheduling software still has not been rolled out, and now
19 there is a debate that is still ongoing between whether it
20 will be the Epic Cadence software or the Cerner Millennium
21 software. And all this time, we still have these
22 challenges. It just seems like there is not a priority on
23 getting the solution deployed in a timely manner, and the
24 deliberation is killing veterans. We have got to do better.
25 Senator Tester. I could not agree with you more.

1 I will tell you that I came out of the State
2 legislature in Montana, and we have been here for 12 years.
3 And I have watched hundreds of millions of dollars be spent
4 on IT systems, with never getting the return we are supposed
5 to get on them.

6 One last question while Chairman Takano takes his
7 chair.

8 In January, the Court of Appeals for the Federal
9 Circuit ruled that veterans are entitled to the percent of
10 exposure of Agent Orange for Blue Water Navy service ant the
11 territorial waters around Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

12 I would say the same as Commander Nixon. You said
13 earlier the VA needs to do the right thing and fully
14 implement the court's decision immediately and not challenge
15 it.

16 Veterans have waited too long for this. Exposures
17 occurred more than 44 years ago, and we are losing Vietnam
18 veterans due to this exposure literally every minute of
19 every hour of every day.

20 So could you explain to me, Commander Nixon, what it
21 would mean to the Vietnam veterans if the VA does not adhere
22 to the court decision?

23 Mr. Nixon. I am going to let Director Reese respond to
24 that.

25 Senator Tester. Okay.

1 [Laughter.]

2 Mr. Reese. Well, I think when we look at the actual
3 events that has occurred here and the court case that rolled
4 out there, Procopio actually identified that this was a
5 misinterpretation. It has been years in the making. Not
6 only was it the VA misinterpretation, then the court's
7 misinterpretation.

8 Bottom line, these Vietnam veterans have been waiting
9 for 40 years, and justice delayed is justice denied.

10 So our feelings is that would be a complete and total
11 betrayal.

12 Senator Tester. Yep.

13 [Applause.]

14 Senator Tester. Commander Nixon, Director Reese, thank
15 you very much.

16 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, Senator.

17 Chairman Isakson. Jon, thank you.

18 [Applause.]

19 Chairman Isakson. We are going to do something now
20 that you will not very often see done in the United States
21 Congress. I am a Republican Chairman that is going to turn
22 it over to a Democratic Chairman to complete the meeting.

23 [Laughter.]

24 Chairman Isakson. We do that because we have absolute
25 trust in each other, and we have said in our meetings we are

1 a bipartisan committee. And we are. That is why we got so
2 far with your issues last year, and that is why we will get
3 so far with our issues.

4 They had to go to testify a lot this afternoon and
5 could not be here, But Chairman Takano has come back, and I
6 am going to turn it over to him for his remarks as well as
7 recognize any House Members who do come back and wanted to
8 get their statements in.

9 But before I leave, I want to say this. You have been
10 extremely helpful. Commander Nixon, if I am not mistaken,
11 this is the 50th anniversary of your taking a bullet for the
12 Country or a bomb for the Country years ago?

13 Mr. Nixon. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.

14 Chairman Isakson. It is also the anniversary of D-Day
15 this year.

16 Mr. Nixon. Yes, sir.

17 Chairman Isakson. It is a big year for you. It is a
18 big year for the Country. But God bless you. We would not
19 all be here if it was not for you and the people like you
20 and the people in this room, so God bless you in what you do
21 and what you have done.

22 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, Senator.

23 [Applause.]

24 Chairman Isakson. I tell everybody, you know, America
25 is a great Country. You do not find anybody trying to break

1 out of the United States of America. They are all trying to
2 break in.

3 [Laughter.]

4 Chairman Isakson. And that tells you something right
5 there. As bad as people might complain about things here,
6 you do not ever see them leaving.

7 Alec Ginnis [phonetic] is one of those guys in
8 Hollywood who is always talking about he is going to leave
9 after one more election. I wish the hell he would go
10 because we have got a lot of people like you who we care
11 about, who care about your Country, and who have done a lot
12 to make us free. And we appreciate it very much.

13 Please pardon me for leaving early, but I am leaving it
14 in good hands. Thank you for your service to the Country.
15 Thank you for your input today, and we will continue to work
16 for you and the Disabled Veterans of America to see to it
17 the VA is your VA and works well. God bless you.

18 Mr. Nixon. Thank you.

19 [Applause.]

20 Chairman Takano. Thank you.

21 I will say before the Senator leaves, I know that they
22 had to do a little jawboning while the House Members were
23 going to do a long vote series. The Senators, my friend
24 Senator Tester and Senator Isakson, do what Senators do
25 best, which is to talk a lot and to move really slow, and so

1 I really appreciate that you are both good at that.

2 I see that some of our House Members are arriving.

3 So, Senator, thank you for holding down the ship. I
4 really appreciate working with you.

5 Chairman Isakson. Chairman Roe, if he gets in trouble,
6 you take over, okay?

7 Chairman Takano. [Presiding.] Oh, is Chairman--oh,
8 good. Well, Ranking Member Roe. I am the Chairman.

9 So I am very glad to see our House Members coming in.

10 I am going to now recognize myself for 5 minutes or
11 however long. I do not plan to go the full 5 minutes.

12 But, Commander Nixon, I associate myself with all the
13 remarks that my Senate colleague Isakson said about your
14 50th anniversary and all the wonderful things that you have
15 done to sacrifice for our Country.

16 But I know a lot of questions have been asked about
17 health care, but I want to move over to the benefits side.
18 I know that the DAV, a big issue for you is benefits.

19 Congress provided the resources over the past couple
20 years for the Veterans Benefit Administration, the VBA, to
21 hire several hundred new full-time employees, which they
22 have done. The Board of Veterans Appeal, the BVA was given
23 authority for 125 new attorneys.

24 These are the two agencies, the BVA and VBA, charged
25 with implementing appeals reform. In your estimation, are

1 these two new agencies adequately resources in your opinion?

2 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, sir. That is a really, really
3 good question, and I think I will ask Mr. Marszalek to
4 answer that question.

5 Mr. Marszalek. Thank you.

6 We certainly do at this point. It is very hard to tell
7 with Appeals Modernization on whether we are going to need
8 more staff.

9 What we do know is that over 40,000 veterans elected to
10 participate early into RAMP, which gave veterans options to
11 participate in Appeals Modernization, and over \$45 million
12 in benefits were paid to those 40,000 veterans. So we are
13 certainly off to a good start, but it is very early to tell
14 whether we are going to need additional staff at the board
15 or at VBA to fully implement it all.

16 But right now, we are just going to pay very, very
17 close--provide very close oversight over the implementation
18 and see how it goes.

19 Chairman Takano. I appreciate that.

20 Commander Nixon, are you concerned about what happens
21 with legacy appeals going forward, specifically the appeals
22 that are not in the new program because the appellant chose
23 to stay with the old system due to being close to their
24 docket dates?

25 Mr. Nixon. Again, I will defer to Jim, Director

1 Marszalek.

2 Mr. Marszalek. Thank you.

3 We are certainly concerned. We are going to pay very
4 close attention to that.

5 Right now, on the legacy process, at any time you
6 receive a statement of the case or a supplemental statement
7 of the case, you can opt-in to the new process if you want.
8 With over 400,000 legacy appeals, over 60,000 hearing
9 requests, we are very concerned about how that is all going
10 to work in the process.

11 When you file a notice of disagreement, you could wait
12 up to 2 years before you get a statement of the case. So
13 that is the only time you can opt-in now that you are in a
14 legacy process.

15 So we are going to continue to pay very close attention
16 to that and monitor it and see how quickly it moves this
17 particular year going forward.

18 Chairman Takano. Well, thank you.

19 I am now going to yield back my time, but, Dr. Roe, 5
20 minutes.

21 Dr. Roe. Thank you. Can I make an opening statement?

22 Chairman Takano. Oh, go ahead. Go ahead, please.

23 OPENING STATEMENT OF DR. ROE

24 Dr. Roe. Thank you all, first of all, for being here.
25 I apologize. We have had a busy day, as you have also, and

1 one of the fun things I got to do this morning was go out
2 and dedicate the property for the Desert Shield/Desert Storm
3 War Memorial for our Gulf War heroes.

4 [Applause.]

5 Dr. Roe. Vice President Cheney was there, and he was
6 Secretary of Defense at that time. It was a real honor to
7 be the lead sponsor of that bill, and thank you all for your
8 support.

9 Thank you, Chairman Takano, and good afternoon,
10 Commander Nixon and members of your panel and your staff.

11 I want to extend a special welcome to members of the
12 Disabled American Veterans and members of the DAV Auxiliary.
13 I did not see any members from my district. They may be
14 here, but just in case, I want to acknowledge anyone in the
15 audience who made the trip from my home State of Tennessee.

16 [Applause.]

17 Dr. Roe. Oh, yeah. There we are.

18 And, Commander Nixon, no disrespect, but there would
19 not be a Texas without Tennessee. I want to pass that
20 along.

21 [Laughter.]

22 Dr. Roe. You will have the mic back in a minute.

23 Thank you all for your unwavering commitment to those
24 who have served and equal important to their families.
25 Commander Nixon, as you know, we have enacted several

1 monumental laws last Congress, which will pave the way, we
2 think, for a better VA with your help.

3 I want to thank you, the DAV's leadership team, and DAV
4 members across the Country for your support, unwavering, I
5 might add.

6 Congress' job does not end after the President signs a
7 bill into law. Otherwise, it is just a piece of paper. We
8 have got to continue to oversee VA's implementation of these
9 laws. We all share a common mission, and that is to improve
10 the services and benefits for veterans and their families.

11 Members in this room have different ideas on how we
12 accomplish that goal, but I want to share with you my
13 priorities for this Congress. One issue that is near and
14 dear to my heart and one that DAV has been a tireless
15 supporter of is the fight for our Blue Water Navy veterans,
16 Vietnam veterans. We have to get this passed.

17 [Applause.]

18 Dr. Roe. 382 to zero in this place is not easy to get,
19 and that is what we had in the House.

20 Last Congress, the House did its job, as I said, passed
21 the bill 382 to zero, which is why I was so disappointed
22 that the bill got stuck in the Senate last year.

23 Therefore, it is my desire that this bill pass the
24 House again and be taken up quickly by the Senate.

25 I am encouraged, as you all are, I am sure, about the

1 Federal Circuit Court's recent ruling regarding Blue Water
2 Navy veterans in the Procopio versus Wilkie. We cannot stop
3 until these veterans receive the benefits that they have
4 earned.

5 Another primary focus of mine will be to continue our
6 work on improving the disability claims and appeals
7 approach, as the Chairman was speaking of.

8 Last week, the Veterans Appeals Modernization and
9 Improvement Act, or AMA, it went live.

10 And I will just tell you a quick story. I was in
11 Nashville at the RO and at the hospital about a month ago,
12 and I ran into a Marine Reserve veteran, an 8-year veteran,
13 who had tried for 7 years to get his disability claim
14 adjudicated. He was a poster child for the AMA. In less
15 than 90 days, he had a 7-year wait taken care of. That was
16 a very happy veteran. Let me tell you.

17 The AMA completely revamped the way appeals are
18 processed at the VA and gives veterans a choice and control
19 over how the VA handles their appeal.

20 I look forward to continue working with the DAV to make
21 sure that veterans are better served by the new process.

22 Another priority of mine is a strong, effective
23 oversight of the VA MISSION Act. I said it before, and I
24 will say it again. Our efforts to improve how veterans
25 referred to the community providers is intended to

1 supplement, not supplant the VA health care system.

2 My goal has never been to prioritize the VA. Rather,
3 my goal is to make the VA health care system work better for
4 veterans, as a purpose of improving VA's Community Care
5 Program and the Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission.
6 The AIR Commission is intended to assist VA, modernize, and
7 realign its medical facility footprints across the Country
8 in order to meet the needs of veterans where they live.

9 I am confident that once and appropriately implemented,
10 the VA MISSION Act will lead a stronger, more stable VA
11 health care system that serves the needs of veterans and
12 their families.

13 I am also proud to work on the 115th Congress on the
14 Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of
15 2017. I assure you that we hold the Secretary to his
16 commitment that every veteran will receive the benefits to
17 which they are entitled and will be made whole.

18 We will also continue our oversight of the Department
19 of Veterans Affairs Accounting and Whistleblower Protection
20 Act of 2017. This law gives the Secretary tools to swiftly
21 and fairly discipline senior managers and employees who
22 engage in misconduct or are poor performers. Individuals
23 who rely on VA deserve no less.

24 Last but certainly not least in my priorities will be
25 to oversee the Electronic Health Record modernization.

1 Without a doubt, the biggest risk right now with EHR
2 implementation is the persistent holes in coordination
3 between VA and DoD. I believe the special oversight that
4 the Committee has devoted to the issue is vitally important,
5 and I commend--I might even like to command him, but I
6 commend to Chairman Takano for retaining the Technology
7 Modernization Subcommittee we established last Congress.

8 As you can see, there is still a lot of work ahead of
9 us. I look forward to moving through this process with your
10 help and more importantly continue our partnership with DAV
11 to ensure VA provides the very best care possible to every
12 veteran.

13 And I salute all of you and thank you for being here,
14 and with that, I yield back.

15 [Applause.]

16 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Chairman Roe.

17 I would like to now recognize the gentlewoman from
18 Nevada, Ms. Susie Lee, for 5 minutes.

19 Ms. Lee. Thank you, Chairman. Good afternoon.

20 First of all, I want to welcome you all here and thank
21 you very much not only for your service to our Country, but
22 also your service to veterans and making sure that we
23 continue to provide care to men and women who have served
24 our Country, including--my father was a veteran of the
25 Korean War, and so I am proud to serve on this Committee.

1 I want to thank you, Commander Nixon, for your
2 leadership as well and for providing the DAV's national
3 priorities to Congress.

4 I would also like to thank--is Nevada in the house?
5 Who do we have here from Nevada? All right. I knew we had
6 at least five of you here.

7 [Applause.]

8 Ms. Lee. I am pleased that DAV is the leader on the
9 needs of women veterans, in particular, a growing population
10 in my State of Nevada, where they make up almost 10 percent
11 of an estimated population of 220,000 veterans. These
12 numbers reflect the national trends as well.

13 And I am proud to say that one of my three staff
14 members is a veteran, is a woman who served our Country in
15 both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as a wrecker
16 operator, my staffer, Jahira [phonetic], was tasked with
17 hauling vehicles off the dangerous roads in the desert in
18 Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan. She and her fellow
19 Marines on a daily basis left the safety of their armored
20 vehicles and exposed themselves to the potential sniper fire
21 and the secondary IED detonations to get their fellow troops
22 and vehicles back to the base for safety.

23 I bring up her story to highlight the role of women in
24 combat and to let the American people know that women
25 veterans have been putting their lives on the line for this

1 Country for centuries, including some of our Federal--our
2 members of our delegation who are here.

3 As the population of women veterans continues to grow,
4 we need you, the DAV, to continue to champion women's needs,
5 and I am glad that VSOs understand that no veteran should be
6 left behind. And that includes providing parity and care
7 for all veterans. Our women veterans are not asking for
8 anything more than anyone else.

9 And I also want you to know, as I mentioned in your
10 testimony, that it is our intent in Congress to provide
11 proper oversight to the Community Care Program and the new
12 access standards, and that means no privatization.

13 Veterans constantly tell me that they are happy with
14 the care they receive at the VA, and I want to make sure we
15 build a VA infrastructure, including the technology
16 infrastructure, which I am proud to be the Chairwoman of the
17 Technology Modernization Subcommittee, to keep this quality
18 of care and to improve it when it is not available.

19 I want to make sure we are hiring at the VA and the
20 VBA, and we need to clear the benefits backlog and get our
21 veterans the care they need when they need it.

22 Commander Nixon, I would like to ask you one question.
23 We share the common belief that equitable health care is
24 deserved, regardless of gender. Now with women veterans, it
25 is 10 percent of the population, and these numbers are

1 expected to grow. What does the DAV anticipate as the ideal
2 future state of the women's health program?

3 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, ma'am, for that question

4 I am going to ask Director Reese to comment, please.

5 Mr. Reese. The ideal state would be for our women
6 veterans to have equitable access to the same health care as
7 their male counterparts, the care, the services, the
8 programs, including VA specialized services, in addition,
9 substance abuse and disorders, homelessness, treatment for
10 PTSD related to combat or military sexual trauma, and for
11 the most part to actually have the same walk-in facilities
12 as their male counterparts.

13 Right now, we have women clinics that is for
14 specialized care. Oftentimes, that is where they get
15 shuttled to, but all the resources of the facility are not
16 available to them. We would like to have them have equal
17 access, each and every location, each and every specialty
18 within the Veterans Health Administration.

19 Ms. Lee. Absolutely. Thank you.

20 [Applause.]

21 Ms. Lee. And I yield the balance of my time. Thank
22 you very much.

23 Chairman Takano. The gentlewoman yields back.

24 I would now like to recognize the gentleman from
25 Michigan, General Bergman.

1 Mr. Bergman. Thanks, Chairman Takano, and thank you
2 and Dr. Roe and all the Members up here.

3 I am sorry we had to leave. We had to go vote, and you
4 know, as a Marine, it is mission first, right? I did a
5 quick tally here, and it seems like the Marines have taken
6 over this dais. So I am going to use real short words. We
7 are going to be real direct. I am going to be kind, just
8 like your DIs, okay?

9 So the point is, number one, there are a few things
10 that--any Korea or World War II vets in the crowd? Okay.
11 Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

12 [Applause.]

13 Mr. Bergman. And for those who served in Desert
14 Shield, Desert Storm, and OIF/OEF, and subsequent, thank you
15 for your service. And to my Vietnam brothers and sisters,
16 welcome home. Welcome home.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Bergman. So, if my remarks are tainted with a
19 little bit of Vietnam-era attitude, it comes because we
20 shared the commonality of service during that time frame,
21 and it was a challenging time for our Country in many
22 different ways.

23 So let us start with Blue Water. All I can tell you is
24 there is a pretty good chance that maybe some of you flew on
25 one of my helicopters. We did not discriminate when we

1 landed aboard the ship coming off the Vietnamese soil, back
2 and forth. We did not go through a wash-down. So the
3 chances of contaminants that were sprayed there on the ship
4 as well as in the aircraft, as well as in this, we need to
5 get that legislation passed to include everybody in the
6 presumption of Agent Orange, pure and simple.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Bergman. Now, I have got one question for you, and
9 that is, when we talk about health care for veterans or
10 health care for family-related, whatever it happens to me,
11 what is most important? That they get quality, top quality
12 health care in a timely manner, or that they get it through
13 the VA system? If you had to choose one or the other, what
14 is your choice?

15 Mr. Reese. Thank you, Congressman, for that question.

16 We would obviously choose, even if it is the private
17 sector, that the top quality care for our Nation's veterans
18 should be conveyed.

19 Mr. Bergman. Well, thank you, because 2 years ago when
20 I asked the question, there was a different answer in the
21 room. And the point is our VA is working hard every day to
22 provide quality health care, but we have to realize there
23 are certain parts of the Country where rural--my district,
24 for example, and I know many others here, that getting it
25 from the VA the number one priority, you now limit the

1 veteran's ability to actually get it because you may have to
2 drive through a snowstorm and you have hours or whatever.

3 We as the VA Committee under Dr. Roe's leadership last
4 term and Mr. Takano's leadership this term, we are going to
5 do everything we can to make sure that the care is quality
6 first, available second, and if you will, long-term
7 reaching.

8 So I am just thankful to be here with you. This sounds
9 like a speech, but with all of you in the room, you have
10 worn the cloth of the Nation. You know what it is like, and
11 I am honored, as we all are on this dais, to represent you
12 here in the 116th Congress.

13 Thank you so much. I yield back.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back.

16 Next, I would like to recognize the gentleman from New
17 Hampshire, Mr. Pappas.

18 Mr. Pappas. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to
19 Commander Nixon, to the leadership and membership of the DAV
20 and Auxiliary. It is really a pleasure to be with you here
21 today. It is an honor to be in a roomful of heroes, and I
22 thank you all for your service and what you are doing today
23 to speak out loudly and clearly for the veterans.

24 I received this packet yesterday and spoke with the
25 delegation from New Hampshire, and I do not know if New

1 Hampshire is in the house here today.

2 [No response.]

3 Mr. Pappas. All right. They are letting us down, but
4 they are with us in spirit. And they are roaming the halls,
5 and they are also communicating the message about your
6 priorities. And we have got to work collaboratively with
7 you all over the next couple years to ensure that your goals
8 are the goals of Congress and that they get fully
9 implemented into law, and I am committed to ensuring that.

10 One of my concerns is representing a rural State, a
11 State without a full-service VA hospital, is that we are
12 ensuring that the services are there for individuals when
13 they need them and that individuals are not cut off, whether
14 they have a disabilities or whether they have to travel a
15 long distance to get to where they need to be to access
16 care.

17 I am wondering, in particular, about the promise of
18 telemedicine and what you think that holds particularly for
19 a disabled veteran population in a rural State like mine.

20 Ms. Ilem. Telemedicine has been--we are very pleased
21 that VA has been a leader in telemedicine because it is
22 absolutely essential, and we will be moving forward in terms
23 of the way health care is delivered now in many rural areas.
24 And that will help veterans not to have to drive those
25 distances in inclement weather and all the other challenges

1 that are often in those communities' experience.

2 So telemedicine is--VA is really dedicating a lot of
3 effort, a lot of resources to make sure it is topnotch, high
4 quality, and that veterans get the care then when they need.
5 And oftentimes, that can be via video chat, via call, and
6 that is the way for the future.

7 Mr. Pappas. Well, thanks.

8 Director, I do not know if your veterans have been
9 experiencing any issues working with the VA on this, if they
10 have access to the technology that they need and the
11 expertise to be able to get connected with a specialist, get
12 connected with care through telemedicine.

13 Ms. Ilem. We have heard a number of good reports that
14 veterans like it. We have heard of it being used in both
15 mental health services and for a variety of services, and VA
16 is just expanding that in a number of uses. So it is
17 really--it is moving in a positive direction, I think, and
18 right now, we have not heard anything negative about that.

19 Mr. Pappas. Great. Well, I appreciate that.

20 One of the other programs that I have gotten to know a
21 bit is the Adaptive Sports Grant Program, and right now, it
22 is plugged in for \$15 million in FY '19. And, again, this
23 is a successful program that connects disabled veterans with
24 services and is really supportive of their efforts to rehab
25 in particular.

1 So I am wondering if you could comment on whether or
2 not you think that is an adequate funding figure for that
3 particular program or whether you would like to see it
4 increased.

5 Ms. Ilem. Absolutely critical program. DAV's Winter
6 Sports Clinic relies on veterans being able to have access
7 to adaptive sports equipment through VA's Prosthetics
8 Department. These adaptive equipment make a difference in
9 the life of a veteran, the quality of life, them being able
10 to--it makes a difference between them being able to do
11 something that they have loved, want to continue doing, even
12 though they may have suffered a very severe disability. So
13 we need to make sure that that--that funding is available
14 for that program and make sure that that continues on and
15 veterans get what they need.

16 Mr. Pappas. Thank you all. I really appreciate your
17 work, look forward to continuing to work with you, and I
18 yield back, Mr. Chair.

19 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back.

20 I would like to now recognize the gentlewoman from
21 Guam, Ms. Radewagen.

22 Ms. Radewagen. Talofa. That is "welcome" in American
23 Samoan.

24 I want to thank Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Dr.
25 Roe for holding this series of joint hearings to hear from

1 our VSOs.

2 I want to thank all of you, the members of the panel,
3 for coming, and a special thank-you to the DAV for sending
4 your representatives to speak to my staff yesterday. You
5 are always welcome in my office, and I especially want to
6 highlight DAV's efforts regarding community care programs,
7 Blue Water Navy, the burn pits issue, and improving gender-
8 specific services for female veterans.

9 When my staff briefed me on DAV's priorities for the
10 116th, I was so pleased to discover that once again their
11 list for the new Congress matched my own. I am proud to
12 cosponsor several DAV-supported bills, and I look forward to
13 continuing work with DAV on veterans legislation in the
14 future.

15 Our VSOs are the gatekeepers for our veterans' voices
16 in Washington. The work all of you do to ensure that our
17 veterans are afforded the benefits and services they have
18 earned is so very important, and I want to thank you all for
19 your service to our Nation and those who stand in defense of
20 her.

21 As we move forward with this Congress and continue to
22 address veterans' issues, I know that your priorities and
23 goals will be at the forefront of our mission to improve the
24 lives of our veterans. I want you to know that my
25 colleagues and I on both Committees, both sides of the

1 aisle, value your input, and hold your efforts in the
2 highest regard.

3 I want to conclude with a special thank-you to the DAV
4 Department of Ohio for working with my office in identifying
5 DAV members in America Samoa.

6 During my time in Congress, I continue to emphasize our
7 veterans in the U.S. Territories, and I appreciate your
8 efforts in assisting me to ensure that our veterans in the
9 territories are afforded the same opportunities and
10 resources as those in the States.

11 Thank you again for being here today. My colleagues
12 and I look forward to working with you all.

13 I yield back the balance of my time, Mr. Chairman.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Takano. The gentlewoman yields back.

16 And my apologies to the people of the American Samoa
17 and to you for mistakenly saying that you were from another
18 place.

19 I now would like to recognize the gentleman from
20 California, my fellow Californian, Mr. Levin, for 5 minutes.

21 Mr. Levin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Very grateful for
22 the opportunity to be here today, and thank you all so much
23 for being here.

24 As the new Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs
25 Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, I value your input. I

1 need your input and your guidance this Congress, and I am so
2 grateful for you all for traveling from everywhere in the
3 Country to be with us today.

4 My district in San Diego and Orange Counties is home to
5 Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, and many of our
6 servicemembers spend time at Camp Pendleton. I realize the
7 weather is pretty good. I just checked. It is 65 and sunny
8 right now in San Diego, and as a result, we have a high
9 number of veterans that decide to come back and stay in our
10 community.

11 We are strengthened by our veterans as part of an
12 integrated whole in my district, and they help every day
13 facilitate the economic success of our region.

14 However, there are also a number of veterans who need
15 help as they transition. They face challenges related to
16 high housing costs and job training, and I really hope that
17 together we can make progress on issues this Congress
18 related to the GI Bill, homelessness, vocational
19 rehabilitation, home loans, and much more.

20 Commander Nixon, I have just a few questions. Veterans
21 homelessness is something we are deeply familiar with in
22 Southern California, and a lot has been done in the last 10
23 years. A lot of gains have been made, but I think we all
24 would acknowledge that there is plenty more work to be done.
25 If even one veteran is homeless, that is one too many.

1 So I wanted to ask you what recommendations you might
2 be able to provide us on ways to address this issue.

3 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, sir. We certainly share in your
4 concerns, and I would ask Director Reese if he could comment
5 on that, please.

6 Mr. Reese. We certainly do. As far as homelessness
7 across the Country, it is a shame that we have veterans that
8 are in that mix.

9 DAV has long had programs, services, to include
10 services from our Charitable Service Trust, where we provide
11 resources necessary so that homeless veterans, those who are
12 indigent or those who are in crisis states have
13 opportunities to recover.

14 In just the last year, we have given out 19 grants in
15 the amount of \$685,000 to assist programs in order to
16 deliver those goods ourselves as an organization. We are
17 very proud of being able to do that.

18 In addition to that, within the VA, the resources of
19 the veterans' stand-down programs, we participate across the
20 Nation. We also host one of those stand-downs at our
21 National Headquarters in Cold Spring, Kentucky. So DAV is
22 very engaged in regards to the homeless community across the
23 Nation.

24 In regards to some of the clinical care pieces that go
25 along with the homeless program, I would defer to our

1 National Legislative Director, Joy Ilem.

2 Ms. Ilem. I would just add one of our focuses with
3 regard to homeless is making sure that women veterans can
4 take advantage of all of the very specialized programs that
5 VA has in its homeless program.

6 For example, we know that women, veterans, often have
7 the care of their dependent children are with them, and VA
8 by law is not able to provide rapid housing for children of
9 a veteran that may need that service. And so they often
10 will not take advantage of it.

11 So some specialized programs in legislation has been
12 introduced to make sure that does not happen, that VA
13 partners with the community so that they can do rapid
14 housing, and there is a number of other issues like that
15 safe housing with women that have their children with them.

16 So we look forward to working with your office and also
17 addressing that issue and making sure that all veterans can
18 take advantage of VA's great efforts in this regard.

19 Mr. Levin. Absolutely.

20 I just had an opportunity to go to the stand-down in my
21 district in North County, San Diego. It was an
22 extraordinary day where we served a couple hundred people
23 either on the brink of homelessness or who were in fact
24 homeless, a whole variety of services, health care, dental,
25 housing, job training.

1 My hope is that in time, we can achieve effective--zero
2 homelessness for veterans because, as I said, one homeless
3 veteran in my mind is one too many, and I am really hopeful
4 we can do that, certainly, in my district.

5 So I really want to commend you all for your great work
6 on behalf of all veterans, but particularly those who are
7 facing some tough times. So we really do appreciate your
8 hard work, and thank you for being here with us today.

9 And I will yield back the balance of my time.

10 [Applause.]

11 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back.

12 I would now like to recognize the gentleman from
13 Indiana, Mr. Banks. Is he still here? He left. Okay.

14 Then I will move on to the gentleman from Illinois, Mr.
15 Bost.

16 Mr. Bost. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

17 And thank you all for your service. We cannot say
18 thank you enough. It is quite an honor to serve on this
19 Committee, to serve in the capacities that I have the last
20 couple years.

21 I was just thinking--and the previous speaker, he
22 represents an area that 39 years ago today, I was 3 days
23 short of graduating from Marine Corps boot camp. And let me
24 tell you, it is a beautiful place, but it really was not a
25 pleasant time, so just need to know.

1 [Laughter.]

2 Mr. Bost. So I do want to say thank you to all of you.

3 Thank you for your service.

4 Let me tell you that last year when we moved forward
5 with the Appeals Modernization Act and we moved forward with
6 that, we were working hard on that because it is vitally
7 important that this process be speeded up. The amount of
8 people that have the appeals out there and the frustration
9 that they can feel, I myself have experienced it in a case
10 on a hearing loss that I had in the Marine Corps.

11 But let me tell you that I have worked with the VA
12 tremendously to try to make sure we speed this process up,
13 and I want to thank the members of this Committee, former
14 Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Roe, Chairman Takano, all of
15 them for working hard to make sure we pass that law.

16 Commander, I want to thank you for your service to our
17 Nation and your service to the DAV.

18 I know you probably were answering this when I came in
19 a while ago, and I am going to go ahead and ask it again,
20 anyway, so that I can get the answer because, as a Marine,
21 as I just said, I have that hearing loss. I was coming in
22 the door.

23 When we passed that bill, I had a really, really big
24 concern that our legacy members that were on the legacy side
25 were going to take even longer. What do you see right now

1 with the VA as they are implementing this, and where have
2 they been working with you? And how can we help to make
3 sure they speed this process up for these legacy appeals?

4 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, Congressman, for that question.

5 As you said, you were kind of late coming in. You do
6 not know that I have been handing all of these off to
7 Director Reese.

8 [Laughter.]

9 Mr. Reese. Well, as you know, Appeals Modernization
10 was absolutely essential because it was something along the
11 lines of a 33-year backlog under the best of circumstances,
12 and something had to be changed in order for veterans to get
13 the justice that they deserve.

14 In regards to that, the details that you are looking
15 for, Director Marszalek will answer your question.

16 Mr. Marszalek. Thank you.

17 Ranking Member Roe talked about a veteran that he came
18 across that his appeal was resolved in RAMP in a matter of a
19 few months after waiting 7 years, and that is exactly what
20 this system is designed to do. And RAMP was exactly that,
21 right? It was an opportunity to opt-in if you had a current
22 appeal in the legacy system.

23 Unfortunately, they did not get the turnout they
24 thought they would get in the beginning. I think it was a
25 little over 50,000 folks that elected to participate in

1 RAMP, and now here we are. It was implemented last week,
2 and there is still over 400,000 legacy appeals pending. So
3 that is certainly a concern of ours, and the two opt-in
4 options right now are when you receive a statement of the
5 case or a supplemental statement of the case.

6 So if you have a legacy appeal, those are your two
7 opportunities to opt-in to the new process, when you receive
8 one of those decisions, and it requires a specific from,
9 obviously, to opt-in.

10 So it is really early to tell. We certainly--the focus
11 has to be on legacy appeals. Chairman Mason from the Board
12 presented to this group yesterday at the hotel at our
13 conference and talked about how that is their priority to
14 ensure that legacy appeals are a priority for everybody.

15 So we are going to continue to remain vigilant and
16 really watch over and make sure that they are a priority for
17 everybody. Those are the folks who have been waiting the
18 longest. We have got to make sure they get timely
19 decisions, and then they have their options as well.

20 With regards to Appeals Modernization, there is really
21 no wrong option there. You can elect any one of those
22 options. Your effective date is protected, and it really
23 puts veterans in the driver's seat on what they want to do.

24 Mr. Bost. Which is what we want.

25 Let me tell you that our Committee--I am Ranking Member

1 now--Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs--we are more
2 than willing. If you see issues come up, you come to us.
3 We will be on it just as fast as we possibly can.

4 Thank you all for your service, and thank you for being
5 here today.

6 I yield back.

7 [Applause.]

8 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back, and before
9 I recognize my colleague from California, I want to say that
10 Julie Brownley's bill successfully passed the House in the
11 past few weeks by a 400-vote margin, thanks to the work, the
12 bipartisan work, with Dr. Phil Roe and the Republican
13 members of this Committee in advance to the floor. And it
14 was the Access to Child Care bill, which gives veterans who
15 are seeking health care at veterans medical facilities the
16 ability to get child care so they do not have to choose
17 between taking care of their children and getting, say,
18 their mental health treatment. It is a tremendously
19 important bill.

20 And I also want to take note that the first act of this
21 Committee--and I know that a priority of the DAV are
22 addressing specific issues related to women veterans. We
23 have established a special women's task force, and so not
24 only is the next Member I am going to recognize, Julia
25 Brownley from California, the Chair of the Health

1 Subcommittee, but she will also lead our special Women's
2 Veterans Task Force.

3 So I recognize my colleague, Julia Brownley, for 5
4 minutes.

5 [Applause.]

6 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate
7 that, and I too want to add my voice and welcome the DAV
8 here. I look forward to these meetings every time we
9 convene a new Congress, and I appreciate, Commander Nixon,
10 your leadership, the rest of your directors, all the
11 leadership throughout the DAV across our Country.

12 Thank you for serving our Country, and thank you for
13 continuing to serve our Country by making sure our veterans,
14 men and women, across the Country are served properly. So I
15 appreciate it.

16 Commander Nixon, I want you to know that the folks here
17 in Washington that represent the DAV every single day do an
18 extraordinary job of advocating for veterans across the
19 Country and particularly veterans from DAV. So they do an
20 outstanding, outstanding job.

21 Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you, under your
22 leadership, for allowing me to lead this women's task force.
23 I am extraordinarily excited about it.

24 Our mission is really to try to identify where we are
25 not serving our women veterans properly, whether it is their

1 health care or any of the other benefits that the VA
2 provides, and we want to identify those gaps, if you will,
3 and begin to create policies and/or procedures within the VA
4 to address those.

5 We have an intention of really utilizing your
6 expertise, but talking to women veterans across the Country
7 to help us identify what those issues are.

8 Also, we want to figure out where all the barriers are
9 for women to access the benefits that are there, and what we
10 have determined so far is many women leave the military and
11 do not identify as veterans and therefore do not access the
12 services. So we want to be able to try to penetrate on that
13 and identify where those barriers are and figure out how the
14 VA needs to change in order to be a welcoming mat to female
15 veterans.

16 I know that Congresswoman Lee, when I walked in, she
17 was also asking about services to women veterans, and I too
18 would just like to ask a similar question, if we can, to
19 drill down a little bit more. And I know we will have many
20 more meetings after this, but what are some of the very
21 specific policy proposals that you think this task force
22 should prioritize and to better ensure our services to
23 female veterans? Commander Nixon.

24 Ms. Ilem. Well, we appreciate the creation of this
25 task force. That is excellent. As you know, DAV, this has

1 been a longstanding critical priority for DAV, ensuring that
2 our women veterans, that their military service is
3 acknowledged, that their contributions in service are
4 celebrated, and that they are treated with dignity and
5 respect. They want what every veteran wants, those things.

6 I know that there is peer-to-peer assistance provisions
7 in some of the bills that are out there right now. I think
8 that is critical. We know that our women veterans often
9 isolate. They do not have that peer-to-peer interaction,
10 which is so essential to make sure that they can get the
11 services that they need in VA, but also legal and support
12 services. We know from the challenge reports and the
13 homeless reports that often women have problems with having
14 legal services for getting child support payments, any
15 eviction notice with the homeless issue as well.

16 The newborn care and adoption assistance and there is
17 eliminating these number of access barriers, as you noted,
18 for women not being--not identifying, self-identifying, not
19 realizing about the services that are out there for them.

20 But we have seen such an increase in the number coming
21 to VA, which is encouraging, but we want to see that growth
22 continue. We want women to use the VA health care system.
23 The VA research that is being done is second to none. We
24 know more about the subpopulation of any veteran, about
25 veterans, and because of their complex health needs, we know

1 it is the best place for them. So we want them to get the
2 services they need.

3 The Child Care Act that you have been such a champion
4 for and the other bills, that is a barrier that has been
5 identified over and over again. If I do not have access to
6 child care, I just cannot get those specialized mental
7 health services I need or go into the VA.

8 So I think there is a number of things that can be
9 done, and I look forward to providing any assistance for
10 DAV. You know how important this issue is to us in our most
11 recent report. So we hope that also lays a road map out
12 there for the number of issues that can be tackled, and I
13 think this is excellent news.

14 Ms. Brownley. Well, thank you for that. I will look
15 forward to working closely with you and all the other VSOs
16 and women veterans across our Country to make sure that we
17 are servicing our women in a way, in addressing the needs
18 that they have. And I believe in many cases, whether it is
19 mental health, it might be, a woman--men and women can
20 experience military sexual trauma, but I think in terms of
21 addressing that, men and women may need to deal with that in
22 a different way.

23 That is just one example, I think, of many where some
24 of the services that are out there, we may want to have a
25 shift in the services specifically to address women.

1 But it is something that we will investigate and get to
2 the solutions, and I really appreciate your advocacy around
3 this.

4 Commander Nixon, thank you again for your leadership
5 and being here today.

6 And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

7 [Applause.]

8 Chairman Takano. The gentlewoman yields back, and I
9 look forward to the work she will be doing with the Women's
10 Veterans Task Force.

11 I just want to take note that this year is a first for
12 our Committee. Congresswoman Luria of Virginia is the first
13 woman veteran to serve on our Committee.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Takano. And of our five subcommittees, three
16 of them are chaired by women members of the committee.

17 I now would like to recognize the gentleman from
18 Pennsylvania, Mr. Meuser.

19 Mr. Meuser. Thank you, Chairman.

20 Commander Nixon, all members of the DAV, Disabled
21 American Veterans, it is really an honor to be here and work
22 to serve you, all of you who have served our great Country
23 so well.

24 I had the occasion to be over at the Pentagon yesterday
25 for a good part of the day, and it was fascinating. We got

1 some very good information. We certainly have a very strong
2 and mighty military. We just got to keep it that way, and I
3 think a few of you likely agree.

4 I am from Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Ninth, so it
5 is eastern central Pennsylvania. We do have in the
6 district, Fort Indiantown Gap, and we have the Lebanon VA.
7 We also have many veterans who utilize the Wilkes-Barre VA,
8 which is just outside of the district.

9 I also have as many as 88,000 veterans. So out of a
10 district population of 705,000, we have 88,000 veterans. So
11 it is certainly a veteran-rich district, and it is one of
12 the reasons that it is such a great district.

13 Is anybody here from Pennsylvania, by the way? All
14 right. Hoorah.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Meuser. Let us get a Yuengling later.

17 [Laughter.]

18 Mr. Meuser. All right. So I certainly have a number
19 of questions, and I had the chance to speak with a few
20 veterans and members as I came through.

21 Commander Nixon, I will let you delegate it. I would
22 just like to ask you what you think that we should be doing
23 here in Congress and on the Veterans' Affairs Committee to
24 help employment opportunities for our brave men and women.

25 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, sir.

1 I will defer that to Director Hall.

2 Mr. Hall. Well, thank you, certainly, for the
3 question.

4 DAV is doing quite a bit in the employment sector. We
5 started our employment program back in 2014, and while it
6 comprises a lot of components, one of the larger parts of it
7 is that we are able to host career fairs across the country,
8 to include some online career fairs.

9 They are well attended. We have quite a few employers
10 that come and participate in that.

11 Specifically, over the last few years that we started
12 the program, we have sponsored more than 476 career fairs.
13 More than 175,000 people have attended. That includes
14 spouses. And it resulted in a little over 130-, 132,000 job
15 offers.

16 That alone is only one component of it. We have a lot
17 of online tools and resources that are available to veterans
18 at jobs.dav.org.

19 And our newest venture that we have is that we launched
20 our DAV Guide to Hiring Veterans with Disabilities, which is
21 really for employers, and it has been met with a lot of
22 favor and a lot of success from those folks in the sector.

23 We did a hard launch of the guide back in October in
24 light of the National Disability Employment Awareness Month,
25 and that alone, we had more than 50,000--more than 60,000,

1 really, visits to that page on our website because it is
2 free for download, and it is aimed at being able to provide
3 some quick solutions to companies that were apparently
4 meeting a lot challenges when it came to our barriers, when
5 it came to hiring veterans with disabilities.

6 So, with that, we have various other components,
7 sponsoring a television program, hiring America TV, which is
8 weekly, to provide a lot of these resources and outlets for
9 veterans and their spouses to be able to access those
10 employers.

11 Mr. Meuser. Well, thanks. Thanks for that
12 information. Certainly, if there is ever anything at all
13 that you can provide that we could be or I could be of
14 assistance, please contact my office or, of course, this
15 Committee. And that goes for all veterans in the office.
16 It is truly my honor to serve.

17 We salute you, and thank you very much for your
18 service.

19 I yield back my time, Chairman.

20 [Applause.]

21 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields back.

22 I now recognize the Ranking Minority Member of the
23 Committee from the House side, Dr. Roe, for any questions
24 and your final comments.

25 Dr. Roe. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1 Commander, a shout-out to you for your service. I read
2 your testimony last night, and a shout-out to the DAV for
3 providing almost \$9 million in vans in the last couple of
4 years, along with the association you have with Ford Motor
5 Company. Full disclosure, I have got a Ford pickup truck
6 too.

7 [Applause.]

8 Dr. Roe. That is absolutely awesome.

9 I wanted to thank the Auxiliary. I think one of the
10 things that happens many times--and I did not think about it
11 as a young man when I was deployed, but the families you
12 leave at home. They have to look after a lot of things, a
13 lot of responsibility when we are deployed at not home. So
14 I want to thank all the Auxiliary members who serve and
15 supported us and supported you. So a shout-out to them
16 also.

17 [Applause.]

18 Dr. Roe. We have talked about a lot of things, and I
19 know our colleague from California. I was in California
20 about a year and a half ago, and 10 percent of our homeless
21 veterans in the yesterday are in L.A. County. It is an
22 amazing number, I found.

23 When General Shinseki was the first Secretary when I
24 first came on the Committee in 2009, we had 100,000 homeless
25 veterans. That number is now under 40,000. That is too

1 many, but the VA is working in the right direction.

2 The biggest problem I find where I live and I bet
3 everywhere across the country is adequate housing stock. We
4 just do not have enough housing, and we have got the
5 vouchers. But we do not have the housing stock to put these
6 men and women in.

7 At that same meeting I had in Nashville, I ran across a
8 female veteran who was homeless, now is in a HUD-VASH
9 voucher program, has a job, and had a smile from ear to ear.
10 So I know the program works when you get out and talk to our
11 various veterans around the country.

12 Commander Nixon, I want to go over just a couple of
13 things.

14 Oh, by the way, just for full disclosure, four of the
15 five Ranking Members on the subcommittees are veterans on
16 the Republican side. I just want to point that out.

17 [Laughter.]

18 Dr. Roe. Commander, I know the VA electronic health
19 record modernization is a dense subject, to say the least,
20 but I want to commend Adrian Atizado, your Deputy National
21 Legislative Director, for his work on the issue. I do not
22 want to embarrass him too much, but I want you to know the
23 Committee considers him a tremendous resource. I want to
24 pass that along.

25 [Applause.]

1 Dr. Roe. A couple things I want to go through very
2 quickly and then I will finish up, we passed, hopefully, a
3 transformative bill for the VA, which is the VA MISSION Act,
4 and, Commander, very quickly, what are your all's initial
5 impression of the access standards that the VA just rolled
6 out?

7 Mr. Nixon. Thank you, sir.

8 I will ask Mr. Reese, the Director.

9 Mr. Reese. Well, unfortunately, as you know,
10 throughout the process of creating the MISSION Act and its
11 actual work groups at the VA, Members of Congress, staff
12 from Congress, the VSOs, and several stakeholders--it was a
13 great collaborative process. It came to fruition with a
14 bill that we all thought was a nice compromise and a nice
15 consensus document that became law. Unfortunately, since
16 that time, we have not been engaged, and we have not been
17 able to give adequate feedback in regards to those access
18 standards.

19 We were basically told the same thing as Congress was:
20 It will be coming out in the Federal Register, and you can
21 read them then.

22 So they did come out about 10 days ago. We are giving
23 a hard look at them. So far, what we have seen is, for the
24 most part, the access standards that were published, they
25 are an average, and unfortunately, our Nation is not based

1 on average.

2 We think that they are arbitrary, and we will have to
3 have a look at the market assessments in order to determine
4 whether that care would even be there. If the care is
5 there, is it timely? And if it is not timely--or is it high
6 quality? Again, if those categories are not met, the
7 outcomes certainly are not going to meet the standards of
8 the VA.

9 As you know, today, VA leads the way. VA care in most
10 markets across the country is equal to or better than in the
11 private sector.

12 A little while ago, I was asked a question by a Member
13 that was along the lines of if you had a choice between
14 getting fast care or getting quality care, which would you
15 choose? Of course, for our veterans, we want quality care,
16 but 99 percent of the time, that is going to be at the
17 Department of Veterans Affairs today.

18 [Applause.]

19 Dr. Roe. Thank you.

20 And I agree. We had the same wait that you had, but we
21 will have more bites at the apple before June the 6th, and
22 we will go on.

23 I want to finish up by just pointing something out to
24 you that is going to happen tomorrow and just ask maybe for
25 your help a little bit. In the House, we just voted on a

1 rule--that is why I was late getting here a little bit--that
2 will permit limited debate on legislation affecting the
3 Second Amendment rights.

4 A little-known and -understood provision of those
5 bills--we will vote on it tomorrow--would read as follows,
6 "It shall be unlawful to sell any firearm or ammunition to
7 any person knowing or having a reasonable cause to believe
8 such person has adjudicated with mental illness, severe
9 development disability, or severe emotional disability."

10 There are 1.6 million disabled veterans with a service-
11 connected adjudication by VA of mental illness, including 1
12 million--about nearly 1 million with PTSD. We need to slow
13 this train down.

14 So we can understand what we are doing, I had an
15 amendment to clarify that veterans with a VA mental illness
16 adjudication were exempt from the bill standard, but that
17 was ruled out of order. I could not get that in the bill.

18 So just to make you aware, it is 1112, and I just think
19 we need to debate this a little more and a little longer
20 before we say that a veteran who has protected this Nation--
21 my concern is that we will take veterans, and they will be
22 afraid to come in to speak to us about their mental problems
23 because they might lose their right to own a weapon, and
24 where I live, that is very, very important where we live in
25 the First Congressional District of Tennessee.

1 I want to finish by thanking Chairman Takano, and I
2 knew this would not be too long of a meeting today because
3 former Sergeant Major Walz, who is now the Governor of
4 Minnesota--I knew if it was going to be a long meeting, he
5 had two 20-ounce Mountain Dews. So I know that the Chairman
6 just has a bottle of Perrier. That is California. I am
7 just drinking our regular water, whatever comes out of the
8 bottle.

9 [Laughter.]

10 Dr. Roe. But I want to thank the Chairman. I look
11 forward to working with him, and this has been a bipartisan
12 Committee. As you all know, we could never have gotten done
13 in the last Congress what we got done, and with your help,
14 we will continue to do what is right for our Nation's
15 heroes.

16 I thank you. I salute you, and I appreciate the
17 opportunity to serve.

18 I yield back.

19 [Applause.]

20 Chairman Takano. Mr. Reese, I want you to know that
21 what I heard you say in your answers to Dr. Roe is that the
22 new access standard raises more questions than it answers,
23 and I hear at least six or seven questions that need to be
24 answered from what you said.

25 With that, I just want to thank everybody for being

1 here. I want to thank Dr. Roe for the example he set and
2 all that he achieved under his leadership.

3 This Committee was enormously productive. It passed
4 just a huge number of bills, and some of the bills that are
5 unfinished, I am going to take them up, and I am going to
6 pass them and make sure that we pass them early enough so
7 that we get them through the Senate.

8 The priorities that you have outlined, every one of
9 them, I want you to know this. Your priorities are my
10 priorities.

11 I look forward to working with you and all of your
12 members.

13 Commander, I want to thank you for the time you put in
14 to serve this organization as its leader, for what you have
15 done to serve our Country, and what all of your members have
16 done to serve our Country.

17 And let me just say this. God bless all of you, and
18 God bless the United States of America.

19 This hearing is now adjourned.

20 [Applause.]

21 [Whereupon, at 4:31 p.m., the Joint Committee was
22 adjourned.]

23

24

25